

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Jury Finds Colombian National Guilty of Conspiracy and Transporting 593 Kilograms of Marijuana on Board a Go-Fast Boat

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ST. THOMAS — United States Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert announced Wednesday that Cristian Valencia Mendoza was convicted of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute a controlled substance and possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute while on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, following a jury trial in St. Thomas U.S. District Court.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, on October 18, 2019, the defendant was located on board a go-fast style vessel that was intercepted by a United

States Coast Guard (USCG) cutter on routine patrol in the Eastern Pacific. USCG crewmembers first sighted the go-fast vessel in international waters, approximately 45 nautical miles north of Malpelo Island, Colombia. The vessel did not display any indicia of nationality and the co- conspirator, the captain of the vessel, told members of the USCG Boarding Team that the vessel was without nationality.

Twenty one bales of marijuana, consisting of 593 kilograms, were located on board the vessel and seized by USCG crew members. The defendant waived his rights and gave a statement to DEA Agents detailing his involvement in the drug smuggling operation. He confessed that that he was hired to transport the marijuana from Colombia to Costa Rica. He stated that his role in the crime was to change fuel lines during the trip and to look out for law enforcement aircraft. He acknowledged that he was to be paid a total of 40 million pesos, approximately \$23,000 dollars for his work onboard the vessel.

The defendant will remain in custody, and the court scheduled the defendant's sentencing for April 28, 2020.

This case was investigated by the United States Coast Guard and the Virgin Islands Drug Enforcement Agency. It is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Donna Rainwater and Adam Sleeper.