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Aquarium operator arrested again for probation violation

BY ADAM LINHARDT
Key West Citizen

A former Idaho-based aquarium operator who served prison time for illegally buying wildlife from Florida Keys waters was arrested in Texas last month for violating the terms of his probation that barred him from buying, selling and possessing fish

and other wildlife.

Former Idaho Aquarium Inc. president Ammon Covino accepted a plea agreement with Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Watts-Fitzgerald in December 2013 that called for a year and a day in prison and two years probation in exchange for a guilty plea to one count of conspiracy to import marine life from the

Florida Keys.

As part of his sentence, Covino will never be allowed to purchase, sell, import, export or otherwise be involved in the wildlife trade.

He had faced a maximum of five years in federal prison and fines of up to \$250,000.

The specifics of the circumstances surrounding his Oct. 21 arrest in

Austin, Texas have not been made public in court records, but a detention order signed by federal judge in Texas states the government believes Covino was buying, selling or possessing marine life while on probation that began on Aug. 22, 2014.

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Violation

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"No details have been released yet," said Covino's co-counsel Edward O'Donnell IV of Miami. "The complaint hasn't been released. He's been accused of buying marine wildlife again and that's about all I know at this point."

He added that he wasn't sure if future court proceedings will be held in Key West or Miami, "but it sounds like Key West," he said.

U.S. Marshals were in the process Thursday of transporting Covino to South Florida, O'Donnell said.

Covino had been operating aquarium businesses in Portland, Oregon, as well as Austin and San Antonio, Texas, in addition to the business in Boise, Idaho.

Covino's co-defendant, Christopher Conk, who also was an operator of Idaho Aquarium Inc., was sentenced as part of a plea agreement to four months in prison, followed by four months probation.

Both Covino and Conk were forever banished from the wildlife trade as part of their sentence even absent the probation orders.

Covino will appear before the sentencing judge, U.S. District Judge Jose E. Martinez. His violation of probation hearing date had yet to be set as of Thursday.

Covino spearheaded an operation with Conk to buy \$6,300 in lemon sharks and spotted eagle rays from Eric Paul Pedersen and Serdar Ercan of Grassy Key.

Pedersen and Ercan both pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy and were sentenced as part of a plea agreement in December 2013.

Pedersen was sentenced to two years in prison, followed by two years probation, and was fined \$10,000. Ercan was sentenced to one year and a day in prison, followed by a year of probation, and must pay a fine of \$6,000.

They harvested and sold many different live coral and shark species from Keys waters from 2010 to 2012, according to the government.

Pedersen and Ercan operated a company called Key Marine Inc., based on Grassy Key, which is just north of Marathon. Neither had the required state or federal permits for their business activities, according to court records.

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