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Aquarium operator ordered to pay \$50,000

BY ADAM LINHARDT Citizen Staff
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A former Idaho-based aquarium operator accused of violating the terms of his supervised release from federal prison by buying and selling marine life will donate \$50,000 to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and serve 30 days in jail, according to an agreement between his defense lawyers and federal prosecutors.

Former Idaho Aquarium Inc. president Ammon Covino posted \$500,000 bail in December after he violated the terms of his supervised release from federal prison in October. He was arrested in Austin, Texas for buying, selling or possessing marine life while on supervised release.

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 Grassy Key.

He began his probationary period on Aug. 22, 2014, according to court records.

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

Covino will likely serve the 30 day sentence in Texas, but whether he will do the time in a county jail or federal prison remains to be seen, given the short sentence, said his attorney Edward O'Donnell IV of Miami and his attorney in Texas, David Sergi.

The agreement was approved by U.S. District Judge Jose E. Martinez on Monday, O'Donnell said.

Generally, fines or what the sanctuary calls community service payments go to the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, which then uses the money for resource protection, education or research efforts in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, said FKNMS Superintendent Sean Morton.

Morton added he had not seen the latest court paperwork in the Covino case and could only speak to how funds are used in the past.

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 allegedly 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 in 2013.

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. Neither had the required state or federal permits for their business activities, according to court records.

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