News Articles for 06-11-15 Roundup

**Attorney General Laxalt Announces Guilty Plea of Las Vegas Man in Human Sex Trafficking Case**

 Las Vegas, NV – Nevada Attorney General Adam Paul Laxalt announced that defendant Mario Lamont Jones, II, 25, of Las Vegas, entered a guilty plea last week in connection with unlawful sex trafficking, a category “B” felony. The incidents occurred between March 22 and March 29, 2014.

 On May 29, Jones pleaded guilty to enticing a victim to engage in prostitution on the Las Vegas Strip. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Child Exploitation Task Force removed the victim from Jones’ control, and subsequently uncovered his role in the prostitution. Immediately thereafter, the Attorney General’s Office initiated its prosecution.

 “Under my leadership, this office will continue to protect society’s most vulnerable, especially human trafficking survivors, by aggressively pursuing justice for them,” said Laxalt. “Human sex trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry that relies on deception, threats and manipulation in order to trap its victims, and will not be tolerated.”

Eighth Judicial District Court Judge Louis Eric Johnson accepted Jones’ guilty plea to one count of sex trafficking. Jones is set to be sentenced on July 14, 2015. He faces a term ranging from 3-10 years in prison, and will be required to register as a sex offender.

 This case was prosecuted by Chief Deputy Attorney General Jeff Segal and Senior Deputy Attorney General Raya Swift. Investigators from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department’s Child Exploitation Task Force also worked on this case.

 For more information on human trafficking, visit the Nevada Attorney General’s website.

**Utah massage parlors raided in human trafficking, prostitution crackdown**

SALT LAKE CITY — A strike force aimed at cracking down on crimes involving undocumented immigrants raided nearly a dozen massage parlors and apartments across the Wasatch Front, targeting human trafficking and prostitution.

The Utah Attorney General’s SECURE (Statewide Statewide Enforcement of Crimes by Undocumented REsidents) Strike Force raided 11 parlors on Tuesday, taking women into custody, citing customers for soliciting prostitutes and arresting the owner. FOX 13 accompanied agents as they carried out raids in the Salt Lake City area.

“We believe it’s a criminal enterprise,” said Leo Lucey, the Utah Attorney General’s Chief of Investigations.

Authorities believe the women who work in the parlors are being forced into the sex trade, working to pay off debts after being brought into the United States. Police brought a Chinese translator with them as the women who were questioned spoke little English.

In an interview with FOX 13 on Tuesday, Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes called it “modern-day slavery.”

“It is absolutely slavery,” Reyes said. “It is horrible. It’s horrific and perhaps the most concerning thing about it is people don’t realize it’s going on in our state.”

Reyes has made human trafficking a priority of his administration, cracking down on crimes targeting immigrants and vulnerable populations. He recently traveled to Columbia to participate in a child sex trafficking bust. Reyes said people are smuggled into Utah where they are forced to work in illicit trades — sometimes unaware that they are victims of crimes or unable to get help.

Tuesday’s raids were the culmination of an operation under way for at least a year. The man police allege was operating the businesses from Ogden to West Jordan was arrested in a traffic stop in Salt Lake City. The Utah Attorney General’s Office said felony charges are pending.

At apartments the women were living in, police said they recovered tens of thousands of dollars in cash. The SECURE Strike Force, a coalition of police agencies from all over Utah, has said the money is often laundered back to criminal organizations overseas.

Customers were in several of the parlors when they were raided. Lucey said some of them were given citations for misdemeanor solicitation of a prostitute. Two men brushed past a FOX 13 camera as they left a parlor near 1300 South and State Street, jumping into their cars and speeding off.

At one parlor, a group of women were ushered out the front door into a waiting car. Lucey said at least initially, the women would be treated as crime victims, and provided resources to help them get out of the sex trade. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement is a part of SECURE — and would help assess their status within the country.

“These victims are going to get a chance to get the resources they need, go home — if home is a safe environment — get counseling because it’s going to take years for them to heal from the horror they’ve been living for who knows how long,” Reyes told FOX 13.

**Stephen O'Meara Named AGO's Human Trafficking Coordinator**

Posted: Fri, June 5, 2015

Stephen Patrick O’Meara is the newest staff member of the Nebraska Attorney General’s office. Serving as the Human Trafficking Coordinator, Stephen is the point person for the Attorney General in the development and implementation of a statewide strategic plan to combat human trafficking, including enforcement, victim services and public awareness. In addition, he will participate in the investigation and prosecution of state or federal human trafficking cases.

 In recent years, O’Meara has been actively engaged in the anti-human trafficking movement in both Nebraska and Iowa, working with many organizations including: the Omaha Child Exploitation Task Force, the Coalition on Human Trafficking (Omaha), Nebraska Against Human Trafficking (Omaha), the Iowa Attorney General’s Human Trafficking Investigation & Prosecution Initiative, the Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking, the Central Iowa Services Network Against Human Trafficking, Braking Traffic (Quad Cities, Iowa-Illinois), and the Siouxland Coalition Against Human Trafficking (Tri-state area of Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota).

As Human Trafficking Coordinator for the Nebraska Department of Justice, O’Meara is developing and implementing a statewide victim-oriented plan to integrate enforcement, victim services, and awareness/education. He will work closely with local, state, and federal law enforcement, and with victim services organizations to establish a multi-disciplinary human trafficking enforcement network.

 In part, the Attorney General’s enforcement plan will address the identification, organization, and training of persons involved in enforcement, collateral professions and industries most likely to encounter human trafficking and public awareness.

 O’Meara is a graduate of the Creighton University School of Law and has been practicing law for 42 years. He has worked in western Iowa, Des Moines and Omaha in private practice; served as an Assistant Iowa Attorney General; served as a rural county attorney for 10 years; and for 25 years, until July of 2014, served as an Assistant United States Attorney in Nebraska and Iowa.

While a county attorney, Stephen was awarded the National Association of Social Workers Iowa Citizen of the Year Award for his work in establishing one of Iowa’s first multi-disciplinary child abuse task forces. While an Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Nebraska, he was awarded a United States Department of Justice Outstanding Service Award for the investigation and prosecution of gang, drug and violent crime cases. While serving as an Assistant United States Attorney in Iowa, he was awarded an Outstanding Service Certificate from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in recognition of his success in the prosecution of cases from the FBI-led “Irish Rose” Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force from 1994-1998.

**ACTING US ATTORNEY MYERS AND ATTORNEY GENERAL STENEHJEM ANNOUNCE “BAKKEN ORGANIZED CRIME STRIKE FORCE” IN WESTERN NORTH DAKOTA**

Acting US Attorney Chris Myers and ND Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem held a joint announcement in Bismarck today, to announce the formation of the “Bakken Organized Crime Strike Force.” The key component of the Strike Force is the focused and coordinated mission of identifying, targeting and dismantling all types of organized crime in the Bakken including human trafficking, drug and weapons trafficking, and white collar crimes. The Strike Force follows the 2013 creation of Project Safe Bakken, a collaborative law enforcement program in North Dakota and Montana that joins federal, state and tribal law enforcement in the fight against criminal activity in the Bakken.

“The Strike Force will have the capability of not only dismantling local criminal organizations in the Bakken, but also to take out the national and international components of these organizations wherever they may be located,” said Acting ND US Attorney Chris Myers. “The strike force will take a regional approach to a regional problem, coordinating with Montana law enforcement. We value the strong partnerships already developed with Montana US Attorney Mike Cotter and Montana Attorney General Tim Fox in this fight,” he continued.

“In response to the serious increase in the level of organized criminal activity in western North Dakota, local, state and federal agencies have allocated resources for critical new law enforcement. All of this makes it possible to send a message that law enforcement is doubly dedicated to bringing lawbreakers to justice. This effort will assure citizens that we will always protect our residents, and tells criminals that they do not want to do business in North Dakota,” said Stenehjem.

Bruce Ohr, director of the US DOJ Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) program said he “fully supports the efforts being made in North Dakota and Montana to bring law enforcement agencies and prosecutors together to address the crime problems arising from the oil boom in the Bakken.” OCDETF is a nationwide program that funds agents, prosecutors and task forces to identify and dismantle criminal organizations.

Montana US Attorney Cotter said “the Bakken’s criminal impact transcends borders and so should our law enforcement response. The Strike Force is a welcome addition to our existing multi-jurisdictional law enforcement efforts in the region.”

Federal, state and local authorities have mobilized approximately fifty agents and four prosecutors in a concerted effort to attack organized crime. The strike force is comprised of four task forces, each having allocated federal, state and local agents along with a coordinated state-federal prosecutor. The task forces are set up in Bismarck, Dickinson, Minot and Williston, and will coordinate their investigative efforts.

Stenehjem and Myers will hold a joint news conference in Williston this afternoon. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is currently building a new office in Williston with an expected completion date in 2016. Once completed, this office will contain a federally funded Safe Streets task force to enhance the overall Strike Force capabilities.

**Arizona Files Suit Against Feds over Mexican Wolves**

(Phoenix, AZ)-- The Arizona Game and Fish Department and Office of the Arizona Attorney General today filed suit against the secretary of the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) for failing their statutory duty to develop an updated recovery plan to guide Mexican wolf recovery. The action was taken in an effort to spur development of an updated recovery plan for Mexican wolves that utilizes the best available science as legally required by the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

 This action was preceded in January with a Notice of Intent, which went unanswered by the Service.

“The Service is currently in litigation with special interest groups and settlement discussions could possibly occur without our knowledge or involvement, as has occurred in previous Mexican wolf lawsuits. As the state’s wildlife authority, we will not sit on the sidelines when it comes to decisions affecting Arizona’s wildlife,” said Robert Mansell, chair of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission.

 The Game and Fish Department has repeatedly requested an updated recovery plan from the Service over the past several years. The current recovery plan for Mexican wolves was developed in 1982 and fails to provide several of the key legal requirements. One of the key failings of the current recovery plan required by ESA is the identification of criteria required to downlist and delist this subspecies of wolves from the ESA. Without these criteria, it is impossible to ever remove Mexican wolves from endangered status.

“The State of Arizona and Game and Fish have long been committed to Mexican wolf recovery. However, we have reached a point where without a current recovery plan to provide a framework by which to operate and objective science-based goals to target, the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Project we started in 1998 will be faced with unwarranted litigation with little regard for how biologically successful our efforts become,” said Arizona Game and Fish Department Director Larry Voyles. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is legally obligated to develop a thorough science-based plan that incorporates all of the elements needed for successful recovery, including the inclusion of Mexico and its core range, and criteria for downlisting and delisting. Bi-national recovery plans for endangered species have been successfully established with Mexico for other species including Sonoran pronghorn, Kemp’s ridley sea turtles and, most recently, thick-billed parrots."

 The department asserts that to succeed, Mexican wolf recovery must include an integrated, bi-national approach that incorporates the recovery work already underway in Mexico. Mexico holds 90 percent of the Mexican wolf’s core historic range.

“The federal government has failed to do its part to provide an updated Mexican wolf recovery plan, one that provides real world guidelines for measuring success," said Attorney General Mark Brnovich. "While long supporting a recovery for the Mexican wolf, we have a responsibility to insure Arizona has a seat at the negotiating table.”

The Service is currently in litigation with several parties that are pushing for reestablishment of Mexican wolves in areas that are not part of the subspecies’ historical range and requesting a resolution in an unreasonable timeframe. These groups are basing their litigation on a draft report developed by a Mexican Wolf Recovery Science and Planning Subgroup. The department completed extensive analysis of the subgroup’s recommendations and found the science used as a basis for the recommendations to be significantly flawed. This misguided approach could jeopardize genetic integrity of the subspecies if the Mexican wolf is permitted to reestablish in close proximity to Northern gray wolves.

 Arizona Game and Fish’s involvement in Mexican wolf conservation began in the mid-1980s. Since that time, the department has spent more than $7 million on wolf recovery in the state and has been the predominant on-the-ground presence working to manage Mexican wolves.

 For more information on Mexican wolves, visit www.azgfd.gov/wolf.

**Major EPA fracking study cites pollution risk but sees no ‘systemic’ damage so far**

By Joby Warrick June 4 at 12:29 PM 

Oil drilling operations go on 24-7 in and around New Town, N.D. (Photo by Michael S. Williamson/The Washington Post

The most extensive government review of U.S. “fracking” practices has found no evidence of widespread damage to drinking-water supplies while also warning of the potential for contamination from the technique used to extract oil and gas from rocks deep underground.

The draft study by the Environmental Protection Agency confirmed a number of specific incidents in which fracking techniques had an impact on local water supplies but said the problems until now do not appear to be pervasive.

“We did not find evidence that these mechanisms have led to widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources in the United States,” said the report’s executive summary, released on Thursday. The number of confirmed contamination cases was “small compared to the number of hydraulically fractured wells,” it said.

At the same time, the EPA’s researchers said numerous fracking-related activities “have the potential” to affect drinking water. The report specifically cited the possibility of spills of wastewater stored above ground and the leaking of pollutants from poorly constructed well heads and casings.

“What we also learned was that surrounding water sources may be vulnerable to impacts, and these vulnerabilities should be considered,” EPA science adviser Thomas A. Burke told a news conference.

The report concluded that some of the most significant risks to water supplies could occur far from the oil and gas wells themselves. For example, a “truck carrying wastewater could spill, or a release of inadequately treated wastewater could have downstream effects.”

[These two states had the same basic information about fracking. They made very different decisions]

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is the controversial practice behind the explosive growth of oil and gas production in the United States over the past five years. It involves the injection of liquids into underground rock layers at high pressure to extract oil and gas trapped inside.

The report’s mixed verdict stems from a nearly five-year effort by the EPA to analyze technical data from thousands from fracking operations and nearby aquifers in states around the country. The long-awaited study was ordered by Congress in 2010 and has been dogged by controversy over the scope and scale of the research.

Burke called the draft report “the most complete compilation of scientific data to date,” encompassing 950 sources of information, such as scientific papers and technical reports, as well as original, peer-reviewed research conducted by the agency itself.

“It greatly increases our understanding of potential impacts,” he said.

Energy trade groups and environmentalists reached starkly different conclusions about the report’s central message. The American Petroleum Institute called called the study a validation of the energy industry’s contention that fracking poses little risk to drinking water.

“After more than five years and millions of dollars, the evidence gathered by EPA confirms what the agency has already acknowledged and what the oil and gas industry has known,” said Erik Milito, the institute’s Upstream Group director. “Hydraulic fracturing is being done safely under the strong environmental stewardship of state regulators and industry best practices.”

Michael Brune, the Sierra Club’s executive director, said the report “confirms what millions of Americans already know: that dirty oil and gas fracking contaminates drinking water.” Brune criticized the report for failing to adequately consider the full range of impacts to local communities. “The EPA must conduct a comprehensive study that results in action to protect public health,” he said.

The draft will be finalized after a 85-day comment period and a formal review by the EPA’s Science Advisory Board.

**Washington Scrutinizes the Sharing Economy**

By Rebecca R. Ruiz

WASHINGTON — Washington is thinking hard about the sharing economy these days.

On Tuesday, the Federal Trade Commission held a daylong workshop dedicated to examining Internet peer-to-peer platforms like Uber, Airbnb and Postmates, and their offerings of on-demand rides, beds and slices of cake. Regulators, academics and industry representatives got together to consider the government’s place in overseeing those businesses.

The conversations were not uncontroversial. Sitting next to the head of global public policy for Airbnb, Vanessa Sinders of the American Hotel and Lodging Association warned against “rogue commercial interests” like Airbnb that were going unregulated. In some places, she said, “they are simply illegal hotels.”

Others said it was too soon for the government to intervene in a bigger way. Liran Einav, an economics professor at Stanford University, said he did not think regulations should be extended to the sharing economy just yet. “We should let it play out for a few years to get an idea of how it will operate, and then customize a level playing field,” he said.

Not everyone saw things that way. “It’s wrong that uncertainty should lead to forbearance,” said Glen Weyl, a senior researcher with Microsoft Research. “I’m not sure we have the luxury of saying, ‘We don’t know what’s going on here, let’s wait and see.’ ”

Some companies spoke up to say that they were regulating themselves. David Hantman, head of global policy for Airbnb, invoked ratings systems and background checks as practices that reduced the need for regulatory intervention.

Joshua S. Gans of the University of Toronto echoed that opinion, saying he trusted his teenage children to ride with Uber but not the Toronto taxi system. “It’s because I know there’s no privacy,” he said. “I know where they’re going, and I know who the driver is. That’s pretty tough regulation right there.”

Matthew W. Daus, former commissioner and chairman of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, took issue with calling Uber a member of the sharing economy.

“We’re coming up with these incredible definitions and clarifications, and I’m just trying to throw some water on everybody’s faces,” Mr. Daus said. “There’s no sharing going on. This is about for-hire transportation, and there needs to be a level playing field,” he said, suggesting that capping the number of vehicles on the road was necessary.

Across town at the exact same time, at another conference focused on the intersection of technology, business and government, the sharing economy was also under the microscope. The conference, called Techonomy Policy, included participation from the F.T.C. and the Federal Communications Commission.

“How sustainable is this?” asked Arun Sundararajan, a professor at New York University’s business school.

It was a question raised repeatedly at both conferences on Tuesday, and one left largely unanswered.

“We have no predictive power,” Mr. Gans said, referring to what share economy sharing platforms might someday make up in the overall economy. Twenty percent, 50 percent, 80 percent? Speakers speculated without casting votes.

“The issue is the nature of work,” Mr. Gans said. “Are people going to prefer a lifestyle that allows them to pick and choose more?”

The tension between flexibility and uncertainty, entrepreneurial opportunity and job insecurity was also central to Tuesday’s conversations.

Mr. Sundararajan of N.Y.U. said he thought that at the heart of debate over regulating the sharing economy was the fact that it had blurred the lines between personal and professional realms, commercializing some tasks historically performed for friends. “We’ve always given people rides to the airport,” he said. “We’ve lent our apartments to friends and cooked meals for them.”

He said it was important that regulators acknowledge that, and that they recognize self-regulation as not only an option but also as a way to let the government take on new burdens. “Maybe there are things the third parties can shoulder that the government used to shoulder,” he said.

In a statement on Tuesday, Gary Shapiro, president and chief executive of the Consumer Electronics Association, said he was grateful that the Federal Trade Commission was examining the sharing economy, which he called “free-market economics at its best.”

“We look forward to participating more fully, as the F.T.C. continues to work with stakeholders and achieve a better understanding of these new and innovative economic models,” Mr. Shapiro said.

**Attorney General Resolves Consumer Protection Case Against former N. Idaho Coin Dealer**

(Boise) – Attorney General Lawrence Wasden has resolved a consumer protection case that requires a former Coeur d’Alene coin dealer to pay more than $578,000 to customers.

A state judge signed an order earlier this week against Kevin E. Mitchell, 49, who once owned and operated CoiNuts Inc. Mitchell was accused of taking money from customers, but never making good on his promise to deliver the gold and silver coins.

“This case represents an increasing problem in Idaho,” Wasden said. “Business owners accept consumers’ payments, but fail to deliver their purchases, then shut down operations and ignore refund requests.”

In the lawsuit, Wasden accused Mitchell of committing multiple violations of the Idaho Consumer Protection Act between 2008 and 2012. Consumers came to Mitchell’s store to buy gold and silver coins, and they turned over thousands of dollars expecting that Mitchell could obtain and deliver the coins.

Over time, it became apparent to consumers that Mitchell had misrepresented his ability to acquire the coins. He then ignored repeated requests from consumers for refunds.

Wasden initially filed a lawsuit against CoiNuts and Mitchell in April 2013. The judge in that case entered a $742,826 default judgment against CoiNuts in September 2013.

A year later, the court ruled that Mitchell personally violated state consumer protection laws and permanently barred him from owning or operating a coin business in Idaho. At a hearing last month, the judge ordered Mitchell to repay 10 of his customers a total of $579,569.

“Business owners who are headed down a similar path taken by Mr. Mitchell must stop and contemplate how their misdeeds will damage consumers and the marketplace,” Wasden said. “I encourage all business owners who face financial problems to immediately consult with an attorney. Ignoring your customers is not an option.”

The Attorney General’s Consumer Protection Division welcomes complaints from consumers who paid money to any business for goods or services that were never delivered. Complaint forms are available here or by calling (208) 334-2424.