

News*

CHP seizes \$11M in cocaine

By Mike White, Drug unit's bust one of many along I-5

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Stockton-based California Highway Patrol officers this week confiscated \$11 million worth of cocaine and \$500,000 of methamphetamine in one of the largest recent drug-trafficking busts along Interstate 5.

The cars involved in four separate busts Tuesday originally were stopped for routine traffic violations, although the stops all were made by officers specially trained to look for drugs, the CHP said.

"Our officers hit it right on," CHP spokesman Jason Bartlett said.

The \$11 million in cocaine was discovered in a hidden compartment of a car pulled over late Tuesday near Tracy; the methamphetamine was discovered during three other stops earlier in the day.

The cocaine seizure was the largest ever for a CHP team formed last September to fight drug trafficking along the freeway, the state's major north-south thoroughfare, and elsewhere in San Joaquin County, officials said.

"The I-5 corridor has long been known as a drug-trafficking highway," said Michael Van Winkle, spokesman for the California Department of Justice.

The bust raised the value of drugs confiscated by the team from more than \$6 million to more than \$17 million, officials said.

The CHP won't go into detail about what members of the unit look for when deciding which cars to pull over or the number of officers on the team, except to name its drug-sniffing canine, Osti.

About 11 p.m. Tuesday, a CHP officer noticed a car northbound on I-5 near Kasson Road outside Tracy had a clear plastic cover over the back license plate, which is illegal. The license plate also was not properly lighted, the CHP said.

After the officer pulled over the 1996 Nissan Altima, he reportedly noticed signs of possible drug trafficking, although the CHP will not say what these signs were.

A drug-sniffing dog from the Sheriff's Office -- Osti had the night off -- helped locate a compartment on the passenger side, where officers found 25 kilos of cocaine weighing about 61 pounds and with an estimated street value of \$11,025,200, Bartlett said.

Arrested were Matias Gonzalez Unzueta, 34, and Maria Consepcion Unzueta, 30, both of Bell, in Southern California.

Van Winkle also declined to discuss what officers of the drug unit look for when patrolling the freeway. But he said officers may become suspicious when they learn people in a car do not own it or when passengers and drivers provide conflicting stories.

There is no simple way to differentiate between drivers ferrying drugs and law-abiding drivers; members of the unit just make a lot of stops and eventually come across drug runners, officials said.

And, Bartlett said, officers strictly follow the law by only looking for drugs after someone is pulled over for other reasons.