

TEXAS & Southwest

OKC suffers power outage after copper theft

Copper wire thieves left thousands of Oklahoma City residents without power Friday for the second time in two weeks. Copper prices are at a near-record high, prompting thefts nationwide.

A gully washer in Galveston

Maribel Martinez tucked her cellphone under her chin and tried to keep her belongings dry in a trash bag as she crossed a street knee-deep in water Saturday in Galveston. Heavy rains caused widespread flooding in the area.



CHAD GREENE/The Galveston County Daily News

Firm accused of selling regular beans as organic

Texas company could face criminal charges, fines up to \$10,000

By PAULA LAVIGNE
Staff Writer

A Texas company that sold regular beans as organic to customers all over the nation has been cited for breaking several federal rules and could face criminal charges.

Sel-Cor Bean & Pea, near Lubbock, sold tens of thousands of dollars worth of pinto and garbanzo beans to customers who were told they were organic.

But investigators with the Texas Department of Agriculture determined that owner Basilio Coronado sold them regular beans instead.

State officials referred the case to the Terry County district attorney's office for possible charges. District Attorney Ramon Gallegos said he was reviewing it.

Substantial penalties

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which enforces organic laws, could issue fines up to \$10,000 for violating use of the USDA Organic label. Officials there said they could not comment because of the investigation.

Mr. Coronado could not be reached by phone or fax. His attorney, Jimmy Hammons, said he had no comment.

Sel-Cor Bean & Pea did not grow crops. It cleaned, bagged and shipped beans and peas that it bought from farmers and sold to other traders, distributors or manufacturers.

Mr. Coronado's transactions in

question involved hundreds of thousands of dollars and more than 1,400 tons of pinto and garbanzo beans and milo, according to documents released by the Texas Department of Agriculture.

Those beans trickle down through processing companies and eventually end up on supermarket shelves in bags and cans or as ingredients in other foods, though it's unknown exactly where Sel-Cor's products may have landed.

Every organic business has to be certified by a company or agency approved to enact USDA standards, and Sel-Cor chose the Texas Department of Agriculture as its certifier.

On July 31, Texas agriculture officials issued a notice to revoke Sel-Cor's organic certification, effective Sept. 10. The company has until about the end of August to appeal.

State agriculture officials said Mr. Coronado's records didn't add up. His receipts showed that he was selling more organic products to distributors than he bought from farmers.

The Texas Department of Agriculture's letter to the district attorney's office states that trying to disguise a regular product as organic in order to sell it for a higher price "may defraud the purchaser and create windfall profits for the seller."

"Noncompliance with organic marketing laws not only harms the consumers of specific products directly, but can also indirectly create distrust of all Texas organic products," the letter states.

In one case, Mr. Coronado said he'd bought organic pinto beans from a farmer in New Mexico. That farmer told investigators that he did not sell organic pinto beans to

Sel-Cor and that he did not grow organic pinto beans.

The pinto beans in question were sold as organic to American Health & Nutrition, a wholesale natural and organic company in Ann Arbor, Mich., the records state. The company supplies more than 200 distributors and food manufacturers worldwide.

'It worried me a lot'

"It worried me a lot when I heard about [the Texas Department of Agriculture] doing an investigation of pintos. I know we had taken a truckload and sold them to some very good, highly credible customers," said president Dennis Singsank.

His brother David Singsank, who handles purchasing, said, "Obviously he's lied about a zillion times to everyone about everything. I hope somebody will be able to recoup some of their money."

At least three companies have filed lawsuits against Mr. Coronado for either failing to pay them for product he received or otherwise renegeing on sales contracts. Altogether, the lawsuits demanded more than \$360,000.

When a certifier weeds out a potential violator, that is proof the system works, said Texas Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Beverly Boyd.

"We need to protect the integrity of the organic certification program, not only among organic growers but for the general public," she said. "Consumers need to know when they see the organic label they are buying an organic product."

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Agency requests more prisons

Corrections budget calls for 3 new lockups to handle inmate growth

Associated Press

AUSTIN — Texas needs three more prisons and the biggest expansion of its corrections programs in a decade to keep up with a growing number of inmates, the state's top prison official has told lawmakers.

The \$520 million proposal would also bolster drug-treatment and community programs, said Brad Livingston, executive director of the Department of Criminal Justice.

"This is a multipronged approach designed to allow us to keep up with the growth that is currently projected," he said.

The agency presented the plan Friday as part of a two-year, \$5.6 billion budget request.

Steady growth in the prison population would require more than 11,000 additional beds in the next five years, officials estimate.

State agencies have begun shaping their requests for the 2008-09 budget year and have been asked to submit plans that are 10 percent less than their current budgets. Prison officials warned against cutbacks in their budget.

The expansion proposal includes three prisons with about 5,000 new beds, 450 drug-treatment spaces for prisoners, 150 more beds in halfway houses and 250 more openings in community-based rehabilitation programs for low-level offenders.

The budget request also seeks

more than \$550 million for prison health care and for operating expenses.

Senate and House leaders have questioned whether more prisons will solve the state's problems, which include a shortage of prison guards. Some leaders want to focus on treatment and community-based programs that are less expensive than prisons.

In the early 1990s, Texas tripled the size of its prison system after an increasing number of convicts required tens of thousands of felons to be housed temporarily in county jails.

Since that expansion, several smaller projects have increased capacity to about 152,000 beds.

Drug-treatment and community-based programs also grew. However, recent legislative budget cuts have reduced those.

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