

BUTTE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE MEDIA RELEASE

**JERRY W. SMITH
SHERIFF-CORONER**



DATE : July 5, 2012

RELEASED BY: Lieutenant Al Smith/Felony Investigations Unit

CONTACT # : 530-538-7671

OROVILLE On June 25, 2012 the Butte County Sheriff's Office received information from the Fontana (CA) Police Department regarding a missing person case they were investigating. The information provided by the Fontana Police Department led Butte County Sheriff's detectives to the area of Doon Grade Road and Coutelenc Road in Magalia where a large illegal marijuana growing operation was occurring. On June 27, 2012, the marijuana grow site was seized by Sheriff's Office and US Forests Service investigators. Approximately 28,000 marijuana plants were found in five different plots on Sierra Pacific Industries and private land.

During the search of the grow site, human remains were located near a shallow grave. After conducting area searches over the course of several days using members of the Butte County Sheriff's Search and Rescue Unit, and cadaver dogs from the California Rescue Dog Association (CARDA), additional skeletal remains were recovered from two victims.

During the subsequent investigation, it was determined that the two deceased had been victims of a homicide, and the suspect was identified as Joel Espinoza Beltran (DOB: 2/24/91) from Pomona, California. An arrest warrant, charging Beltran with two counts of murder, was issued.

On July 3, 2012, detectives from the Fontana Police department arrested Beltran in their area without incident. Beltran was booked into the San Bernardino County Jail on Butte County's arrest warrant and is being held without bail. Beltran will eventually be booked into the Butte County Jail to face charges.

The two victims' names are being withheld pending positive identification and notification of family. One of the victims has been confirmed to be the missing person from Fontana PD's investigation. We also believe the victims were shot to death. The motive for the shooting is still under investigation at this time.

The Sheriff's Office would like to warn the public that the season for outdoor, large-scale, illegal marijuana growing operations in the mountain and foothill areas of Butte County has begun. These growing operations represent a serious threat to hikers, hunters, and other people walking in these forested areas. Growers are typically armed and willing to protect these gardens with force. If you come across a marijuana garden, please leave immediately and contact local law enforcement.

Anyone with information regarding this case is encouraged to contact the Butte County Sheriff's Felony Investigations Unit, Detective Chris Nicodemus at 530-538-7671.