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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**March 21, 2011**

## **Federal, State and Local Law Enforcement Announce Major New Initiative**

**WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA — United States Attorney William J. Ihlenfeld, II; Kenneth A. Winkie, Group Supervisor, Drug Enforcement Administration; Colonel Jay Smithers, Superintendent, West Virginia State Police; Ohio County Sheriff Patrick Butler; and Wheeling Police Chief Robert G. Matheny today announced the formation of an initiative called MHIT, also known as the Mountaineer Highway Interdiction Team.**

**MHIT will have the primary purpose of enhancing regional interdiction operations in order to slow the flow of illegal drugs into and through the State of West Virginia. The major focus of MHIT will be on highways and state routes but it will also concentrate on airports, bus terminals, hotels, motels, and parcel and package interdiction. MHIT is made up of agencies from multiple jurisdictions, and presently includes the Drug Enforcement Administration, the West Virginia State Police, the Ohio County Sheriff's Department, the Wheeling Police Department and the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District.**

**Besides enhancing regional highway interdiction operations, MHIT will have the added benefit of disrupting criminal organizations operating within West Virginia and of preserving citizen safety on West Virginia Highways through effective traffic and commercial vehicle enforcement. MHIT will also assist in investigating kidnappings, bank robberies, carjackings, Amber Alerts and interstate theft; the detection and enforcement of firearms and explosives; human trafficking and immigration violations; and fugitive apprehension.**

**“We have a major problem with illegal drugs coming into West Virginia from other jurisdictions, and in order to address this issue we have formed MHIT. This specialized unit will change the way we fight crime in the Northern District,” said USA Ihlenfeld. “MHIT is an exciting new initiative which will provide an aggressive investigative response against drug trafficking and other forms of criminal activities that we are faced with in West Virginia. I hope for this interdiction concept to be mirrored in other parts of the district, including the eastern panhandle and north central West Virginia.”**

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MHIT has actually been in operation for several months and has already proven to be a success. A total of 1,076 stops were made between late September of 2010 and early March of 2011, resulting in 11 felony arrests and 51 misdemeanor arrests. As a result of these patrols MHIT officers seized illegal drugs having a street value of \$14,220. Two stolen vehicles and two stolen firearms were also recovered during that time period.

An enhanced MHIT operation took place last week with patrols of Interstate 70, Route 2, Route 22, and city streets in Hancock, Brooke, and Ohio County. A total of 779 stops were made between March 14 and March 19, 2011, and 92 vehicles were searched. During this time period MHIT officers made 6 felony arrests and 53 misdemeanor arrests, with 23 of those arrests for drug violations. Drugs with a street value of \$1,445 were recovered, along with two stolen vehicles.

“MHIT will serve as a great tool in ebbing the flow of drugs into West Virginia,” stated Ava A. Cooper-Davis, Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration. “As partners in this endeavor, we will leverage our federal resources to take down the organizations responsible for supplying the region with illicit substances.”

Colonel Smithers added, “Without question, agencies working in collaboration is the most effective means to maximize law enforcement resources in our continuing effort to disrupt drug trafficking. We are extremely pleased and remain optimistic in this endeavor.”

“This is not only a great concept, but a tremendous opportunity to stem the flow of illegal drugs throughout the Ohio Valley,” stated Sheriff Butler.

According to Chief Matheny, “The success of this program is going to be the dedication and professionalism of the Officers assigned to this team and the commitment of the area federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.”

Captain James H. Merrill, Troop 1 Commander, WVSP, said that, “I am very pleased to see agencies work together for a common goal. An alliance has been formed between the federal, state and local law enforcement in a cooperative effort to combat the influx of drugs into the Northern Panhandle.”

Sergeant Jason Laing of the West Virginia State Police has been selected to serve as the Coordinator of MHIT. Sgt. Laing has over 17 years of service as a member of the West Virginia State Police, and served as a K9 handler along the I-81 corridor as a member of the Martinsburg Detachment. Sgt. Laing then became a member of the West Virginia Turnpike's Highway Interdiction team before transferring to the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia where he has worked as a Trooper at the Wheeling and Moundsville Detachments. Sgt. Laing has also served as a criminal interdiction instructor at the West Virginia State Police Academy.

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