



AIR CONDITIONER THIEF PLEADS GUILTY TO VIOLATING CLEAN AIR ACT

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COLUMBUS, OHIO – Martin C. Eldridge III, 35, Columbus, pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to violating the Clean Air Act when he cut the tubing on air conditioning units he was stealing and released a regulated refrigerant into the environment.

Carter M. Stewart, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio, Randall K. Ashe, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), Franklin County Prosecuting Attorney Ron O'Brien and Columbus Police Chief Kim Jacobs announced the plea entered today before U.S. Magistrate Judge Elizabeth Preston Deavers.

According to court documents, Eldridge and others stole at least 49 air conditioner units between August and October 2013 in order to sell the copper and parts from the units at scrap yards. When he cut the tubing that connected the air conditioner to the business or residence, a refrigerant known as HCFC-22 was released. The refrigerant is regulated under the Clean Air Act because it poses a significant threat to the Earth's ozone layer. HCFC-22 is also known as R-22 and sold under the trade names of Freon, Genetron, Arcton and Forane.

Eldridge pleaded guilty to one count of knowingly venting HCFCs into the environment. Under terms of the plea agreement, Eldridge will serve 31 months in federal prison. The plea agreement recommends that Eldridge serve the federal sentence concurrent with his state sentence on the theft charges. Eldridge has been in state custody since October 2, 2013. Following prison time, Eldridge will be under court supervision for 12 months during which time he must perform 200 hours of community service. Senior U.S. District Judge James L. Graham will review the terms of the plea agreement before determining whether or not to accept the agreed-to sentence and schedule a date for sentencing.

"The release of ozone depleting substances can cause serious harm to public health, including skin cancer, cataracts, and suppression of the immune system," said Randall K. Ashe, Special Agent in Charge of EPA's criminal enforcement program in Ohio. "The defendant's continual theft of air conditioner parts was illegal and a clear violation of the Clean Air Act. As this defendant has learned, anyone who thinks that breaking the law is worth the risk should think again."

U.S. Attorney Stewart said this is the first federal case of its kind in the Southern District of Ohio. He commended the cooperative investigation by the Columbus Division of Police and U.S. EPA and the scrap metal theft task force, as well as Assistant U.S. Attorney J. Michael Marous and Special Assistant U.S. Attorneys Heather B. Robinson with Franklin County Prosecutor O'Brien's Office and Brad Beeson with the U.S. EPA, who prosecuted the case.

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