

For Immediate Press Release

January 5th, 2026

Public Report
The 2025 Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigations Team (MCNIT) Activity Report

The Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigations Team (MCNIT) is a specialized proactive unit focused on large-scale narcotics investigations and the apprehension of the most dangerous subjects involved in the sale, distribution, and importation of illicit drugs. The Team is made up of one Detective Sergeant from the Montezuma County Sheriff's Office, one Detective from the Cortez Police Department, and is assisted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Division of Drug Enforcement.

We are extremely proud of the work the Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigations Team (MCNIT) has done and continues to do in the Four Corners Region of the United States.

These are just some highlights from 2025 available to the public.

March 30, 2025

The KRW Associates report for Montezuma County BOCC, Public Sector Executive Search and Organizational Consulting report: "The Organizational, Financial, and Budget analysis of the Montezuma County Sheriff's Office". The reports included:

- "Narcotics Enforcement: The MCSO leads a multi-jurisdiction drug investigation team in partnership with the Cortez Police Department. This task force historically operates with assistance from the Department of Justice (DOJ), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) division of drug investigation under an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) agreement. This two-person team, with the assistance of an analyst, conducts significant numbers of narcotics-related investigations and develops cases resulting in arrests. They also provide training to the local fire departments, the police academy, and other area projects. The KRW team was impressed with the effectiveness of the Narcotics team considering limited staffing."

Summer 2025

The conclusion of the largest narcotics investigation in Montezuma County to date. This Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) Investigation included the seizure of over 10.5 million dollars (street value) of cocaine in a single event.

Cortez Police Dept. Chief Vern Knuckles' nomination of the Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigations Team for the Colorado Drug Investigators Association (CDIA) Drug Task Force of the Year Award for 2025. The nominations read:

- “Operation Wild Mustang, launched in October 2023. This two-year OCDETF investigation was the first in the region’s history to target both a Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) and a Regional Priority Organization Target (RPOT). Covering Montezuma County, the Ute Mountain Reservation, and the City of Cortez, MCNIT identified more than 180 individuals tied to the regional drug underworld. The investigation uncovered direct supply lines from a Mexican Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Mexican Transnational Criminal Organization, establishing Cortez and Montezuma County as a critical distribution hub. Operation Wild Mustang produced historic results for the region: 15 individuals charged or convicted, including two guilty pleas, one for methamphetamine trafficking (four-year AZDOC sentence) and one for fentanyl trafficking. Seizures included 14,153.9 grams of crystal methamphetamine (DEA-lab confirmed 100% purity), 4,083 counterfeit fentanyl pills, 525.5 grams of fentanyl powder, and 71,406.1 grams of cocaine with an estimated street value of \$11,072,852. Additional recoveries included \$13,325.76 in cash and 11 firearms. While these figures may appear smaller compared to large metropolitan task force operations; in rural Colorado, they represent an unprecedented disruption to cartel-linked networks. With only two investigators, MCNIT executed a complex, multi-jurisdictional case that brought federal prosecutions, dismantled high-level criminal organizations, and removed dangerous narcotics from the streets. Through strategic collaboration, determination, and operational excellence, the Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigation Team has set a new standard for rural narcotics enforcement in Colorado. Their achievements have saved lives, strengthened community safety, and demonstrated that size does not define impact, making the Montezuma/Cortez Narcotics Investigation Team and its investigators, Detective Tom Quinnett and Detective Sergeant Victor Galarza, a clear choice for the Colorado Drug Investigators Association’s Task Force of the Year award.”

Throughout the year, MCNIT has provided training and assistance to its DEA, HSI, and BIA partners and various other agencies around the United States and Eastern Europe.

June 2025

BIA Special Agent Lyle Benally, a member of MCNIT, was promoted to Chief of Police in the Town of Towaoc, Colorado.

August 2025

Detective Tom Quinnett, a member of MCNIT, was awarded the Meritorious Service Award from the Montezuma County Sheriff’s Office upon his retirement from Law Enforcement after a dedicated 30-year service.

Detective Trevor Robertson, a four-year veteran of the Cortez Police Department, replaced Detective Tom Quinnett.

December 2025

DEA Special Agent Jacqueline Scott, a member of MCNIT, will be awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the Montezuma County Sheriff's Office for her integral part in the two largest narcotics investigations in Montezuma County history.

January 2026

Detective Sgt. Victor Galarza, Supervisor of the Team, presented Sheriff Steve Nowlin and Chief Vern Knuckles with the 2025 MCNIT yearly statistical report, which included the following remarkable seizure numbers:

- **Crystal Methamphetamine total seizure 39,973.73g or 88.127lbs.** Compared to the figures in 2024 of 57,694lbs, this demonstrates a 52.75% increase in seizures, with the illegal narcotic being found to be 100% pure.
- **Fentanyl (powder form) total seizure 280.78g or 9.9oz.** Compared to the figures in 2024 of 265.5g, this demonstrates a 5.46% increase in seizures, with the illegal narcotic also testing positive for Xylazine, making this illicit cocktail even deadlier.
- **Fentanyl (pill M30 form) total seizure 23,370 pills.** Compared to the figures in 2024 of 1,032 pills, this demonstrates a 1,873.84% increase in seizures, with the narcotic also testing positive for Carfentanyl and other analogues.
- **Cocaine (powder) total seizure 76,298.77g or 168.21lbs.** Compared to the figures in 2024 of 2.5g, this demonstrates an unbelievable increase.
- **Firearms seized: 2 guns**
- **US Currency seized: \$13,325.76**

The total value of the seized illegal narcotics is estimated to be \$13,012,225.00 in Street Value.

In his report, Det. Sgt. Victor Galarza also informed, that based on confidential information and intelligence, MCNIT estimates that approximately 100 to 150 non-reported fentanyl overdoses occurred during this year and were treated on scene by individuals present during the event who used Narcan (naloxone) and/or a similar product. MCNIT has also learned that crack cocaine has now arrived in Montezuma County, and black tar heroin is making a comeback to the region.

In addition, his report mentioned that based on 2023, 2024, and 2025 MCNIT investigations, Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations and/or Mexican Foreign Terrorist Organizations, commonly referred to as "The Cartels," are increasing their collaboration with over 9 Drug Trafficking Organizations operating within Montezuma County, now making Montezuma County a "Regional Hub of Distribution".

Unfortunately, the operational capabilities of MCNIT have diminished with the loss of their Criminal Analyst due to budget cuts, the loss of two seasoned investigators, and the continued financial restraints that keep the team at a minimal number of members. With the lack of an actual budget for MCNIT, the future of this team is unknown.

Against all odds, MCNIT remains vigilant and pro-actively continues to identify, infiltrate, dismantle, and destroy the criminal organizations operating in Montezuma County and the City of Cortez that are trafficking and distributing these poisons into our communities.

Steven D. Nowlin, Sheriff
Montezuma County, Colorado