

Law Enforcement Session

The Use of the Special Search Warrant Team in Wildlife Covert Operations

Lt. Chuck Woodson, *Arkansas Game and Fish Commission,
Special Operations Unit, #4 Brookwood Dr., Searcy, AR 72143*

Cpl. Stephanie Moudy, *Arkansas Game and Fish Commission,
District A-3, 104 Pine Meadow, Hot Springs, AR 71901*

Abstract: The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's Law Enforcement Division has been using covert law enforcement operations since 1981. Due to documented increases in illegal commercialization of fish and wildlife resources in the state, the Commission's administrators restructured the covert unit increasing the number of full-time and part-time officers assigned to perform covert tasks. Renewed covert emphasis resulted in an increase in funding and training for covert officers, concentrating efforts to identify, apprehend, and prosecute violators. From initial planning stages the need developed to create a search warrant team consisting of selected officers from wildlife law enforcement districts around the state. All Arkansas wildlife officers had experienced training in this area. But it was felt that the development of a special unit would result in a more effective and cohesive effort while hopefully creating a corresponding esprit de corps. Unit members were selected based upon their knowledge, experience, and desire to be part of a special team with a very important mission.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 56:385-388

In the 1980s and 1990s various state wildlife agencies in the Southeast and across the United States placed increased emphasis on covert operations to combat illegal trade in fish and wildlife resources. It has been reported illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products is second only to the illegal drug trade. Due to high profits and increased criminal penalties associated with commercialization in wildlife and wildlife products, criminals have become more sophisticated and motivated in their methods to avoid detection and apprehension. The uniformed patrol, while essential to wildlife law enforcement, has proven insufficient in responding to this type of criminal activity. Wildlife administrators have long been aware that an adequately staffed, well-trained, properly equipped, and effectively supervised covert unit is a very deterring response to wildlife commercialization problems. Since most state covert units are understaffed, creation of a search warrant team expands the capability of the unit by transferring the responsibilities of executing warrants to the team. Thus freeing investigators to continue with other aspects of the investigation.

Purpose of Search Warrant Team

The search warrant team was established to ensure accountability, consistency, and quality control over the execution of state arrest and search warrants. The team was designed to operate in support of the special operations unit (covert operations). However, it may also be used to assist other law enforcement districts within the state. The rationale was to develop a small well-trained and equipped cohesive unit capable of a quick response complimenting the agency law enforcement mission. Emphasis is placed on professionalism, efficiency, and group spirit.

Development of Search Warrant Team

After the selection of team members, a special 3-day training program was held at the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's training center in Mayflower, Arkansas. The agency training administrator; covert investigators; canine officers; covert agents of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks; and a special law enforcement agent of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attended the session. During this session, training was provided on all aspects of arrest and search and seizure procedures. Special emphasis was placed on the execution of search warrants and the collection documentation, and preservation of evidence. The team leader was selected. Team assignments and responsibilities were discussed with operational plans and related protocols being developed.

In addition, trainers designed practical exercises to evaluate the efficiency of the team and to identify training needs. In one instance, a hunting lodge in a rural setting was selected to serve as the site of an illegal wildlife operation. The search warrant team was provided information to develop probable cause for a search warrant. The team went through the process of securing and executing the warrant. The team secured the premises. Role players were arrested with evidence being collected. While the warrant was executed following established procedures, additional major emphasis was placed on officer safety. The training session was successful in developing standard procedures based on state law. The training staff critiqued each team member, reviewed the team's overall capability as a group, and considered ideas for future training sessions.

Field Application

On any given operation, the Special Operations Unit (SOU) is responsible for the activation of the Search Warrant and Arrest Team (SWAT). The SOU supervisor initiates the call-out process by contacting the SWAT leader making him or her aware of the investigation and providing complete details of the search or arrest warrant, location, and approximate time of execution. The SWAT leader is responsible for contacting each team member informing them of their activation, plus providing information of when and where to assemble for briefing. Each team member is

responsible for notifying his or her supervisor of the activation. The briefing process includes those wildlife officers and their supervisors located within the counties of case jurisdiction.

During the briefing, the case agent provides the team with an overview of the case. This overview includes personal profiles of the suspects along with other information pertinent to the place to be searched. The case agent is responsible for providing the team with the original warrant and any other relevant documents. The SWAT leader is responsible for assigning team members specific tasks. In addition, local supervisors are required to complete a safety form for the SWAT operation. The form includes contact information for local law enforcement agencies, prosecuting attorney, judicial officers, emergency medical services, fire department, utility companies, wrecker service, local drug task force officers and state human resources agencies. Maps and directions to detention facilities and hospitals are included. The form also contains a list of the names and radio numbers of the search scene officers. The wildlife officer supervisors assume responsibility for making all emergency contacts.

Upon the execution of the search warrant, only SWAT members enter the premises. The team is responsible for securing all persons inside the residence and conducting a security sweep insuring officer safety. Depending on the circumstances, occupants may be removed from the premises and released, arrested, or detained for interview and interrogation. The residence or place to be searched is then photographed and or videotaped. A crime scene diagram is drawn. Each room is searched in a counterclockwise pattern. When evidence is located, a designated team member marks its location with a folded index card. Another team member assigns a number to the card, photographs the item, and records it on a log sheet. A third team member is responsible for collecting the item, tagging it with a seizure tag, and placing it in an envelope or box.

After all evidence has been collected and secured, a Seized Property Inventory form is completed. Copies of this inventory are provided to the case agent, team members, the suspect, or as the situation may warrant be left at the suspect's residence. As soon as possible, a search warrant return is completed and along with the seized property inventory returned to the court. Prior to departing the residence designated teams members conduct a final walk-through utilizing still and video cameras documenting the condition of the residence and property. The team ensures the residence and all property are secured at departure. Following proper chain of custody procedures, all seized evidence is released to the case agent or arresting officer. Finally, the SWAT meets and debriefs at a prearranged location.

Accomplishments

During the past year, the search warrant team has been activated on seven occasions to assist the special operations unit and field operations in the state. Cases included a Lacey Act violation, illegal guiding violations, illegal sale of fish and

wildlife, and possession of a controlled substance. In each case, the team performed as anticipated and brought a high level of consistency and professionalism to the investigations.

Conclusion

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is pleased with the concept and performance of the search warrant team and plans to continue with the development and training of the unit. The team has proven to be a valuable asset to both covert and overt field operations. The development of a search warrant team has met and exceeded the expectations of wildlife administrators with the agency. While the team was primarily developed to support the special operations unit, it has proven to be valuable to field officers as well. It is anticipated that additional funding will result in a better-equipped and better-trained team to respond to future law enforcement and investigative challenges.