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SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN HEAT TIPSTER HELPS TO BUST AUTO THEFT RING; TWO YEAR INVESTIGATION LEADS TO 7 SUSPECTS ARRESTED, \$350,000 WORTH OF PROPERTY RECOVERED

Branch County resident receives first \$10,000 reward in two years from HEAT

(8 August 2000) An auto theft ring between Michigan and Texas finally ran out of gas, thanks to the teamwork of a Branch County resident, HEAT® (Help Eliminate Auto Thefts) and the Michigan State Police SCAR (Southwest Commercial Auto Recovery) Team. A 1998 call to the HEAT® confidential, tip-reward line, 1-800-242-HEAT, led to a two year investigation and the recovery of 42 vehicles and over \$350,000 of stolen property. Seven suspects have been arrested and charged with issuing false identification numbers to stolen vehicles and transporting them in interstate commerce. Six of the arrested have already pleaded guilty. Arrests are pending for 2 additional suspects. The tipster has been awarded \$10,000 from HEAT®, the largest reward the statewide auto theft prevention program gives out. The last time this sum had been awarded was 1998.

The tipster, a Branch County resident in Southwestern Michigan, who continued to work with police for two years after the original call in 1998, helped introduce suspects to undercover officers and taped conversations with suspects. The first arrest was made in December 1999 after a multi-jurisdictional raid involving SCAR, Michigan State Police, local police and the FBI.

The theft ring involved stealing vehicles in Texas and tagging them with fake vehicle identification numbers. The vehicles were then transported to Branch County and to Elgin, Ill. where they were resold. "The members of this theft ring were real pros – they had been doing this for quite awhile," said Sgt. George Schemenauer of the Michigan State Police SCAR Team, which is funded by the Auto Theft Prevention Authority. "HEAT has always been a big help to us. The larger rewards encourage people to give us important information towards big cases like this one."

"HEAT is thrilled to play a part in such an important case" said Terri Miller, HEAT® program director. "This is the first \$10,000 tip we have awarded since 1998. The size of the

recovery and the extra effort from the tipster made it clear this case deserved the largest award possible.”

(more)

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The HEAT[®] tip reward line (1-800-242 HEAT) is a prime example of how citizen action can coordinate with law enforcement to fight auto theft crimes statewide and across the border. Citizens who have any information regarding auto theft, carjacking, auto theft related insurance fraud and chop shops have been reporting their “tips” to the confidential, toll free HEAT[®] tip line for the past 15 years.

HEAT[®] tip callers are rewarded up to \$1,000 if their tips lead to the arrest and prosecution of a suspected car thief or auto theft related insurance fraud. Up to \$10,000 is rewarded if the tip results in the arrest and binding over for trial of suspected theft ring members and/or chop shop operators. HEAT[®] also awards \$2,000 for information leading to the issuance of a warrant for a carjacking suspect.

Since its inception in 1985, HEAT[®] has awarded more than \$2 million to tip callers. During that period, the HEAT[®] tip line has received 6,489 calls leading to the arrest of 2,361 suspects and the recovery of 2,891 vehicles estimated at over \$33 million. In 1999, the program made a resounding impact on Michigan’s fight against auto thefts. Last year, the hotline received more than 400 tips that lead to the arrest of 154 suspects and the recovery of more than \$2 million in stolen property.

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