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High-tech pot palace is mind-blowing in scale

Man of many aliases guilty in operation in cave beneath house

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LEBANON — The cave had it all, everything Fred Strunk and his work crews needed to grow 100 pounds of marijuana every two months.

Row after row of white-bright grow lights were powered by "free" electricity via an illegal splice into utility lines. An indoor irrigation system was nearly an engineering marvel. A ventilation system controlled humidity, while a security system featured a bank-vault-like entrance, with security cameras placed everywhere.

Strategically located were escape hatches should lawmen come knocking.

And there was the cave itself, a rock fortress shielding the illegal activity.

Strunk's pot harvests, without a doubt, replaced tobacco and vegetables as Trousdale County's biggest cash crop, investigators said.

The operation made him rich, allowing Strunk to lead the high life. He frequently traveled for business and pleasure and had stylish homes in Tennessee and Florida and nice cars, not to mention enough false identification papers to get lost in a crowd should the need arise, investigators said.

In December, investigators alleged in a 17-count indictment that his more-than-comfortable lifestyle was financed by profits from his high-tech, subterranean marijuana "farm."

On Monday, Strunk, 63, acknowledged that he was the mastermind behind the "pot cave." Faced with a trial when two of his employees, Brian Gibson and Greg Compton, decided to testify against him, Strunk pleaded guilty.

He shuffled into court here Monday morning, his arms and ankles shackled, to face Circuit Judge J.O. Bond. Known over the past decade by at least seven other names — Fred E. Fox, Fred E. Grant, Jerry R. West, to name three — Strunk agreed to plead guilty to three of the

17 counts: manufacturing more than 500 marijuana plants (about 850 were found in the cave), money laundering and theft.

The man who spent four to five years and untold thousands of dollars turning a dark, musty cave into a brightly lit pot palace that had two growing rooms stretching for 100 yards each will now be incarcerated in a state prison for a maximum of 18 years, the sentence received for manufacturing marijuana.

As an offender with no prior criminal record, he could be released after serving 30% of the sentence, depending on his prison record and the parole board's blessing. If so, he would be nearly 70.

Strunk also received 12 years each on the money-laundering and theft charges. All of his prison terms will be served together. He also was fined \$4,000 and must make restitution in the amount of \$60,001 to Tri-County Electric in Lafayette for stolen electricity.

When arrested in December, Strunk had been on the radar of local and regional law enforcement for about nine years.

He answered Judge Bond with "yes" as the judge led him through the process of certifying that he understood he was waiving his right to a trial. In addition to being shackled, the prisoner wore the uniform of a detainee in Macon County, where he has been held since his arrest. He was taken to Wilson County because that is where Bond is holding court this week.

Strunk will be transferred to the Tennessee Department of Correction for assignment to a state prison.

Defense attorney Jack Lowery said his client chose to accept the plea.

"This is something we've been working on for some time now. It was an offer that we felt was reasonable. It was his decision to accept it," said Lowery, of Lebanon. Also representing Strunk was Nashville attorney David Raybin.

Assistant District Attorney General David Durham said he expected the guilty plea.

"When you have a Drug Task Force who knows what they're doing, you don't have any issues. The evidence was overwhelming. I didn't see a lot of wiggle room in this case," Durham said.

After Strunk's arrest at his home near Gainesville, Fla., authorities found numerous fake identities, leading investigators to question whether that was his real name.

An investigator testified about finding driver's licenses issued in four states, including Tennessee. The licenses all had the defendant's photo on them, but different names.

Lawmen also found birth certificates from several counties in Ohio, baptismal certificates from several churches, grade transcripts from Castle Heights Military Academy, a defunct prep school in Lebanon, and numerous Social Security cards.

Some of the documents were forged. Others, such as the driver's licenses, were genuine but were probably fraudulently obtained.

On Monday, however, Durham said his office was "convinced he's Fred Strunk."

Although the defendant did not have a prior criminal record, the assistant prosecutor said he did not believe this was the first time Strunk had been involved in such a scheme.

"It was so elaborate, the way things were set up," Durham said.

According to the prosecution and defense, possession-of-marijuana charges levied against Strunk when he was arrested in Florida will be dropped now that he has pleaded guilty in Tennessee.

Meanwhile, the stylish A-frame house at 2125 Dixon Creek Road — sold three times in recent years, each time to one of Strunk's aliases — will now be sold again at public auction, Durham said.

"The 15th Judicial District Drug Task Force has seized the house and property," he said.

Durham noted that the house and 30 acres would probably be a hot item, no doubt because of the size of the basement. •