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# Man gets prison in fertilizer case

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LAFAYETTE — A Lake Charles man who bilked the state by overbilling for fertilizer sold to prison farms was sentenced Thursday to spend six months behind bars and pay \$247,000 in restitution.

Wallace “Gene” Fletcher, 70, pleaded guilty last year to federal fraud charges in connection with contracts his farm-supply company had in 2004 and 2005 to provide several tons of fertilizer to Prison Enterprises, an agency within the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections that oversees prison farm operations.

“He chose to step into the old-boy network and be a part of it,” said U.S. District Judge Rebecca Doherty before handing down the sentence.

No one with the state prison system has been charged for involvement in Fletcher’s scheme, but Randy Whitstine, a retired Prison Enterprises employee, told The Advocate in an interview last year that “higher ups” at the agency appeared to be favoring Fletcher.

Whitstine, who said he had been scheduled to testify against Fletcher had the man’s case gone to trial, also said that truck’s delivering Fletcher’s fertilizer were never weighed to determine if the prison system was receiving the correct amount.

Fletcher’s six-month prison term is below the 21 months to 27 months recommended for the case under federal sentencing guidelines.

Doherty said she wanted to balance the need to punish Fletcher and have him serve as an example with concerns over his extensive medical problems. Fletcher’s attorney, Maurice Tynes, argued against any prison time.

Tynes said the criminal case has already taken a heavy toll on his client, a once well-respected community member who has lost his business and been humiliated by publicity about the case.

“He has actually suffered substantial punishment in that regard,” Tynes



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said.

Fletcher's criminal case is one of three connected to investigations of Prison Enterprises in recent years, including one that focused on the former director of the agency, James H. "Jim" Leslie. He was sentenced in 2010 to serve five months in prison for witness tampering.

Leslie also had faced three counts of mail fraud in connection with an investigation into the sale of horses at Prison Enterprises without following requirements for public auction or bids.

U.S. District Judge James Brady dismissed those charges in a ruling that said the horse sale allegations might be considered a violation of the state ethics code but not a federal crime.

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