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## **N.M. Casino Execs Were Fired in Vegas**

**By Jeff Jones and Rene Romo**

*Journal Staff Writers*

Two high-paid executives now running a New Mexico tribal casino were fired by a major Las Vegas Strip resort for their roles in the rigging of promotional contests, according to a Nevada newspaper.

Michael French, chief operating officer for the Mescalero Apache Tribe's Inn of the Mountain Gods Resort and Casino near Ruidoso, and Brian Parrish, director of marketing at that casino, were among four executives fired by The Venetian resort in Las Vegas in 2002, the Las Vegas Sun has reported.

The scandal involved three rigged drawings, including one in which a high roller who had earlier lost big money "won" a Mercedes-Benz. A casino executive hid the winning ticket for the car in his sleeve and pretended to draw it at random, according to The Associated Press.

Nevada regulators late last month announced that the scandal has resulted in \$1 million in fines and fees for The Venetian. It was one of the largest casino fines in Nevada gaming history.

Regulators, however, would not identify the executives involved, the Sun reported. No criminal charges were involved in the case. French and Parrish were identified as two of the executives by a representative of the Mescalero casino, the Sun reported.

French on Thursday told the Journal that he is an ethical and capable manager and that he "cooperated fully with the gaming commission" in Nevada.

"I was found suitable for licensing (by the Mescaleros)," French said.

Parrish referred questions from the Journal to another executive at the Inn of the Mountain Gods, who did not respond to the paper.

Guy Clark, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition Against Gambling, said Thursday the two hires by the Mescalero

casino send a bad message about integrity and business practices.

"If they want to protect the public ... they ought to hire the most squeaky-clean people they can find," Clark said.

Parrish is paid \$175,000 a year by the Mescaleros and gets a cut of the tribe's resort operations.

French makes \$250,000 a year plus a cut of resort profits. He declined during a telephone interview Thursday to give specifics about The Venetian incidents. But he said he made a full disclosure to the Mescalero Apache Tribal Gaming Commission before his hiring in December 2002.

Under the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, tribes are not supposed to hire key casino employees "whose prior activities, criminal record, if any, or reputation, habits and associations pose a threat to the public interest or to the effective regulation of gaming." Tribes are also to submit background-check results about their executives to federal regulators before the executives are licensed.

Albert Apodaca, executive director of the Mescalero Apache Tribal Gaming Commission, refused comment when contacted by the Journal on Thursday.

Under a 1997 New Mexico gambling compact the Mescaleros signed with the state under protest, the tribe is also supposed to submit background-check information on key casino employees to the state Gaming Control Board.

Board executive director Brett Woods said Thursday the Mescalero tribe has been submitting the required information about other hires to the board, but that the board has not received the information about French and Parrish.

According to a Feb. 25 Associated Press story, The Venetian agreed to settle a complaint filed by the Nevada Gaming Control Board after an investigation showed drawings that took place in February 2002 were rigged.

The Venetian released a statement in which it said it cooperated with investigators and regretted the actions of "certain rogue employees," the story said.

The Las Vegas Sun story had Apodaca, the Mescalero executive, confirming that French and Parrish were two of the four employees fired by The Venetian.

The Mescalero tribal gaming commission decided to license the men to work at the New Mexico casino and resort because it believed their involvement in the Nevada scam was more than

offset by their extensive experience, Apodaca said in that story.

The Mescaleros are one of two New Mexico tribes refusing to share a portion of their slot-machine profits with the state and are defendants in a lawsuit filed by the state in federal court.

French was senior vice president of operations at The Venetian from 1998 to 2002. Under his six-year Mescalero contract, French, in addition to his salary, receives a \$3,000-a-month housing allowance and a bonus based on one-quarter of 1 percent of the adjusted net profits from the tribe's resort operations.

Before his hiring at the Inn of the Mountain Gods in December 2002, Parrish was vice president of marketing at The Venetian, starting in 2000.

The tribe in early 2002 embarked on an ambitious plan to expand its gaming presence in the Sacramento Mountains near Ruidoso. Contractors tore down the original 260-room Inn of the Mountain Gods in January 2002 to begin construction on a 211-room luxury hotel that will house an events center, restaurants, a nightclub and a new, bigger casino with 1,000 slot machines.

In May, the tribe opened the Casino Apache Travel Center, a new enterprise on U.S. 70 west of Ruidoso that lures travelers with gasoline, a restaurant and 460 slot machines.



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