

# New charges for alleged Ponzi schemer

Thursday, January 10, 2013 10:05 am

By JOHN BURNETT - Tribune-Herald staff writer

Federal prosecutors say a 72-year-old Hilo woman continued to run an international oil investment scam while awaiting trial on charges related to the alleged scheme. Roberta Beck Wong now faces 28 federal investment fraud charges, and prosecutors say she bilked about 14 investors of about \$600,000 over a period of almost a decade.

Wong was originally indicted in June on 20 charges with the alleged amount taken from investors totaling about \$475,000 at that time.

Wong's trial was originally scheduled to begin Tuesday, but has been delayed until March 19 at 9 a.m. before U.S. District Judge Leslie Kobayashi in Honolulu. Wong pleaded not guilty on Dec. 24 to all charges.

According to court documents, Wong continued the Ponzi scheme after the original indictment and while she was free on \$50,000 bail. Her bail was revoked on Oct. 3 by U.S. Magistrate Judge Richard Puglisi, who ruled that Wong is a danger to the community.

The federal Bureau of Prisons website indicated that Wong is out of custody and was released from the Honolulu Federal Detention Center on Jan. 5.

"She is still under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Prisons, but she is no longer at the facility here," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Les Osborne on Wednesday. "She is now in a law-enforcement sensitive facility, which means that I cannot tell you where."

Asked if he believes Wong will stand trial in March, Osborne replied: "It is our earnest desire to do so."

A document states that Department of Homeland Security agents interviewed Robert Corder of Corpus Christi, Texas, on Aug. 20, and that Corder told agents "that he had been persuaded to invest \$14,000, of which \$2,000 was his money, to be wired to Ghana for investment in an oil production related scheme." The document said that Wong continued to communicate with Corder by phone and email and that Corder kicked in an additional \$35,000.

Corder allegedly told the agents that Wong and an associate, David "Skip" Klahr, "began pressuring him to wire larger amounts of money for various unexpected expenses." The document states that when Corder refused, "Wong and Klahr began asking for small amounts ... including \$2,500 'to cover the travel expenses so an attorney could travel to the United Kingdom and arrange for one of the boxes full of cash to be shipped from Ghana to London.'" Corder also allegedly discussed "the possibility of a \$95,000 loan in connection with the oil and

gas project.” Corder allegedly told the agents that Wong said “she was sorry to be pressuring him about the \$95,000 and stated the money was needed because auditors were going to be conducting an audit of the courier company.”

According to the document, Corder’s cell phone showed that Wong called him twice on both Aug. 14 and 15 and once on Aug. 17. Corder also reportedly turned over recordings of his conversations with Wong and Klahr, as well as email communications. Corder allegedly told authorities the last time Wong contacted him was during the week of Sept. 17.

Osborne said that Klahr has not been charged, but would not comment on whether a future indictment is anticipated or if Klahr is cooperating with authorities. Online sources indicate that Klahr lives in Plano, Texas, but a phone number listed for him has been disconnected and he didn’t respond to a Facebook message. The Tribune-Herald was unable to contact Corder, as well.

All other investors in Wong’s alleged scheme are identified in documents by initials only.

Wong is the mother of prominent Hilo baseball coach and hitting instructor Kaha Wong and grandmother of Kolten Wong, a former Kamehameha Schools-Hawaii and University of Hawaii baseball standout who was a first-round draft pick of the St. Louis Cardinals in 2011 and who might make the major league club this season.

Kaha Wong said Wednesday that his mother is “doing OK” and added “she’s my mom and I love her.”

Osborne told the Tribune-Herald in July that Roberta Wong’s family members “are not subjects or targets (of the criminal investigation) or in any way involved.”

The alleged scheme apparently unraveled on April 11 last year, when Roberta Wong purportedly told a federal agent that “all investors would be paid in 45 days.” One month later, Wong allegedly “apologized for the delay” and told the agent that “everyone would be paid in the next two weeks.”

Wong’s attorney, Deputy Federal Defender Sean Coutain, did not return a call seeking comment by press time on Wednesday.

Email John Burnett at  
jburnett@hawaiitribune-herald.com.