

Farmer sent to prison for raising marijuana

By SCOTT WILLIAMS
of the Journal Star

The largest cultivated marijuana crop ever unearthed in Illinois has led to new charges against the operation's alleged mastermind and a prison term for the struggling farmer who said he joined in to save his family's farm.

Nicholas Seibert, a 48-year-old Gilson farmer who produced about 500 pounds of marijuana on his farmland, was sentenced to four years in prison Friday after pleading guilty to conspiracy.

Seibert wept openly in the courtroom as he recounted for a federal judge how he had been driven to suc-



Anthony Seibert Nicholas Seibert

ceed throughout his life and how he resorted to growing marijuana in a desperate attempt to make his farm a success too.

"I can prove to you that I am a de-

cent citizen," he told the judge. "All I can do is ask for mercy."

U.S. District Judge Michael Mihm, however, rejected Seibert's appeal for probation, saying the fact that Seibert's farm was in financial trouble cannot be used as an excuse to break the law.

"A lot of people have problems today — not just farmers," Mihm said, adding that it was "extremely reprehensible" for Seibert to involve his son in the scheme.

Anthony Seibert, 23, won a suspended five-year prison sentence and five years of probation Friday after convincing the judge that his involvement in the drug operation was even more removed than his father's.

The younger Seibert, represented by a different attorney, said he reluctantly assisted with the marijuana crop because he feared the pressures of a struggling farm might otherwise cause his father to fall into ill health.

Like his father, Seibert pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges. Both faced a maximum prison term of 30 years and a fine of \$250,000. Both were fined \$5,000.

Before his sentence was pronounced, Anthony Seibert told Mihm he feels as though he has given farmers in general "a black eye," and he finds it difficult to face his co-workers on the farm where he now is employed.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Tate

Chambers had high praise for the younger Seibert, calling him infallibly honest and completely cooperative with government investigators.

Both Seiberts are expected to testify in the trial of the Knoxville farmer who allegedly conceived the marijuana-crop idea and convinced Nicholas Seibert that growing the illegal weed was the only way to save his farm.

Ronald Erickson pleaded innocent earlier Friday to new charges included in an indictment that was handed down this week but suppressed until Friday's arraignment.

The federal grand jury indicted

Please see FARMER, Page A2