Man held in molestation cases; police seek Wetterling link

By Pat Doyle; Staff Writer

A man from rural Belgrade, Minn., was arrested Wednesday on charges of sexually molesting two boys in central Minnesota, and authorities said they were investigating whether he is linked to the abduction of Jacob Wetterling.

Authorities said they will question **Duane Allen Hart**, 42, about the Wetterling abduction in St. Joseph, Minn., in October and the sexual assault on a boy from Cold Spring, Minn., last January. They said Hart was not considered a suspect yesterday in either case.

Hundreds of potential unidentified suspects have been interviewed by authorities during the three-month investigation into the Wetterling kidnapping. Virtually all have been cleared after accounts of their whereabouts checked out.

The Wetterling task force became interested in Hart after residents in central Minnesota reported suspicions about him. The investigation intensified in the past two weeks.

"We haven't established a connection at this point, but we are definitely looking into it to see if there is a possibility that it is connected" to the Wetterling and Cold Spring cases, said FBI agent Byron Gigler.

Hart was charged yesterday with sexually assaulting two boys in 1987 and 1989 in rural northeastern Kandiyohi County. One of them allegedly was assaulted in the summer of 1987 when he was 11 and again in the fall of 1989 when he was 13.

The other boy was assaulted in the summer of 1987 when he was 15, authorities said. Both boys told officials that Hart fondled them. On one occasion he offered a boy $5, authorities said.

Although at least one of the boys had reported an assault to local authorities before, there was insufficient evidence until now to arrest Hart, said Kandiyohi County Sheriff Larry Kleinhuizen.

Hart works at a turkey processing plant and was living near Belgrade, in southwestern Stearns County, in a room he rented on a farm, Kleinhuizen said. He has no previous record involving sex crimes.

Jacob Wetterling was abducted Oct. 22 about a half-mile from his St. Joseph home while bicycling with his brother, Trevor, 10, and a friend, Aaron Larson, 11. His abductor wore a mask and carried a gun and grabbed Jacob while ordering the other boys to run.

Authorities believe that Jacob's abductor is the same man who sexually assaulted a Cold Spring boy in January 1989. Both threatened to use a gun, behaved in a bold, authoritative manner and had low, raspy voices. Cold Spring and St. Joseph are about 10 miles apart and are 20 to 30 miles from northeastern Kandiyohi County.

The man who sexually assaulted the Cold Spring boy did not wear a mask. He released the boy, who described his assailant as a husky man, 40 to 50 years old and wearing a baseball-style cap. Investigators wouldn't release a picture of Hart yesterday.

There are dissimilarities between the allegations against Hart and the facts reported in the Wetterling and Cold Spring cases. The charges against Hart contain no allegations that he used a weapon and allege that he enticed the boys instead of using force.

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