WASHINGTON (Hollywood Reporter) - A St. Louis theater worker Tuesday became the first person convicted of illegally camcording a movie under a law that was signed in April making the act a federal crime.

The case was one of several anti-piracy developments, including the filing of federal charges against eight people who allegedly enabled a bootleg copy of "Star Wars: Episode III -- Revenge of the Sith" to circulate on the Internet a day before its release.

In the camcorder case, Curtis Salisbury, of St. Charles, Mo., pleaded guilty to two charges under the recently enacted Family Entertainment Copyright Act, said U.S. Attorney Kevin Ryan, who is based in San Jose, Calif.

Salisbury admitted to using a camcorder in a movie theater to copy "The Perfect Man" and "Bewitched" and then uploading the copies to a computer network for distribution.

"Camcording movies in theaters and putting them on the Internet for distribution is a federal crime," Ryan said. "This first conviction under the Family Entertainment Copyright Act demonstrates that the U.S. Attorney's Office and our (Computer Hacking and Intellectual Property) unit will aggressively employ the tools provided by Congress and the president to combat the theft of intellectual property. Because camcording in theaters accounts for a significant amount of the illegal copies of movies found on the Internet, we will continue to prosecute those who engage in this type of illegal activity."

In June, Salisbury was employed at the Des Peres Cinema 14 Theater Complex in St. Louis in the box office and as a cashier in concessions, according to the plea agreement. After the theater closed, Salisbury allowed accomplices into the theater to help him record movies from the projection booth. Salisbury admitted connecting the camcorder equipment directly to the projector sound board while recording films in the theater. He also used a mini-disc recorder to capture the film sound he would later synchronize with the video, using his computer to enhance its quality.
Salisbury pleaded guilty to making an unauthorized recording of "Bewitched" in a movie theater on June 28. He also pleaded guilty to copyright infringement by distributing the movie "The Perfect Man" on June 21. The movies were transmitted to servers located in the Northern District of California, where an undercover wares investigation was based.

Salisbury is scheduled to be sentenced before U.S. District Judge Ronald Whyte in San Jose on February 27. He faces up to five years in prison and a fine of up to $250,000 for each count.

Salisbury's conviction is part of an investigation known locally as Operation Copycat, which to date has resulted in formal charges against six people in northern California and the execution of more than 40 searches nationwide. Operation Copycat is the local and largest part of the coordinated international law enforcement action known as Operation Site Down, which is targeting online piracy.

Under the Artists' Rights and Theft Prevention Act of FECA, camcording a movie was criminalized. The law also prohibits making a commercially distributed movie available on a computer network accessible to members of the public when the individual knew or should have known that the work was intended for commercial distribution.

In a separate case, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles said the illegal release of "Revenge of the Sith" started with an employee of a postproduction house. Prosecutors did not identify the facility, but sources said Albert Valente, of Lakewood, Calif., worked at subtitling and language dubbing house SDI Media.

Valente allegedly gave a copy to a friend, who shared it with more friends, one of whom -- Marc Hoaglin of Huntington Beach, Calif. -- allegedly uploaded the film onto the Internet on May 18, one day before the movie opened in theaters in the U.S.

Valente has agreed to plead guilty to willfully infringing a copyright, prosecutors said. Similar misdemeanor charges have been filed against six other defendants.

Hoaglin has been charged with one count of uploading the movie onto the Internet, a felony under the recently enacted FECA. If convicted, he faces up to three years in prison.

In another case, Ronald Redding, of Linthicum Heights, Md., was charged Tuesday in Los Angeles with giving his promotional copy of "Million Dollar Baby" to a friend in violation of a contract he had signed with the Screen Actors Guild. Prosecutors said Redding has agreed to plead guilty to the misdemeanor count of willfully infringing a copyright.

The video was uploaded onto the Internet, enabling investigators to trace it to Redding through the disc's watermark.

A third piracy case was resolved Monday as Eric Wright of Bellflower, Calif., south of Los Angeles, pleaded guilty to one count of trafficking in counterfeit DVD labels. Wright was accused of making and selling unauthorized copies of "The Incredibles" and "Friday Night Lights." He is scheduled to be sentenced December 12 and faces up to five years in prison.

Reuters/Hollywood Reporter