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Inmate to spend life in prison for 1988 murder; U.S. Supreme Court had vacated death sentence

ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — A convicted murderer whose death sentence was vacated by the U.S. Supreme Court, setting new standards for the competency of defense attorneys, will spend the rest of his life in prison under a plea agreement reached Monday.

Ronald Rompilla was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death for robbing, stabbing and setting on fire an Allentown tavern owner in January 1988.

A divided U.S. Supreme Court tossed out Rompilla's death sentence in 2005, citing ineffective counsel. Justice David H. Souter, writing for the 5-4 majority, said public defenders had not properly researched Rompilla's history of childhood neglect, alcoholism and mental retardation, information the jury might have considered when deciding his sentence.

The court ordered a new penalty phase hearing for Rompilla. Jury selection was set to begin in Lehigh County Court when the agreement was reached Monday.

Lehigh County Assistant District Attorney Stephen M. Vannatten said his office agreed to the deal to avoid further appeals.

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