

**U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control**  
**“Exploring the Problem of Domestic Marijuana Cultivation”**  
**Statement for the Record**  
**of Kim Thorsen**  
**Deputy Assistant Secretary,**  
**Law Enforcement, Security and Emergency Management**  
**Department of the Interior**

Madame Chairman, Mr. Co-Chairman and members of the Caucus, my name is Kim Thorsen and I am the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Law Enforcement, Security and Emergency Management for the Department of the Interior (DOI). Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department’s views on the “Problem of Domestic Marijuana Cultivation.” I will focus my statement on public and employee safety and the negative environmental impacts of illegal marijuana grow sites on DOI lands.

DOI manages one-fifth of the land of the United States with over 500 million visitors per year. Approximately 41 percent of the southern border of the United States is managed by DOI. DOI has approximately 70,000 employees in 2,400 locations across the United States, Puerto Rico, United States Territories, and Freely Associated States, including roughly 3,500 law enforcement (LE) personnel. Approximately 600 of these LE personnel are members of the United States Park Police (USPP), the urban police arm of the National Park Service (NPS), located in Washington, D.C., New York City, and San Francisco, California. The remaining 3,000 LE personnel are stationed throughout the United States in National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) units and throughout Indian Country. Large tracts of DOI land are patrolled by DOI LE personnel.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration’s (DEA’s) Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression/Eradication Program (DECSP), marijuana is the only major drug of abuse grown within the United States’ borders. DOI and our other public land partners are faced with a continued problem of marijuana cultivation on our public lands. Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) are cultivating large amounts of marijuana throughout remote areas of DOI lands wherever they can find or divert a water resource. The vast amount of cultivation takes place in the western region of the United States. However, traditional DTO campsites have been found in several states, particularly in the west, but also in the Appalachia Region in the east.

Currently, I sit as co-Chair of the Public Lands Drug Coordinating Committee (PLDCC) at the Office of the National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). This group is comprised of the NPS, the BLM, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Division of Refuges and the Office of Law Enforcement and Security within DOI, the U.S. Forest Service, the DEA, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Guard with participation from peripheral agencies. This group meets to develop strategies for working with each other and our state and local partners to effectively utilize limited resources to combat the problem of cultivation of marijuana on our public lands.

In 2009 and 2010, DOI LE located and eradicated cultivation sites at higher elevations than in past years. The standard elevation for cultivation sites in the past was 2000-4000 feet. Sites are now being cultivated as high as 5000-6000 feet. DOI has also located and seized marijuana cultivated in the Mojave Desert including arid areas such as Lake Mead National Recreation Area and Death Valley National Park.

In addition, cultivation activity is now starting earlier in the season and is running longer. In 2010 and 2011 activity was noted in several DOI sites as early as January. These changes show the ingenuity and determination of DTOs to continue their efforts in this very lucrative illicit business. Unfortunately, it also continues to take DOI law enforcement officers away from their traditional duties earlier in the year making what used to be a six month growing season now about a ten month season. This has a tremendous impact on the allocation of law enforcement resources.

The DOI law enforcement bureaus continue to work with our federal, state, and local partners by assigning special agents and uniformed officers to High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Task Forces, DEA and state and local task forces. We have partnered in multi-agency special operations on state and federal public lands such as: Operation "Save our Sierras" in Fresno County, California in 2009; "Operation Trident", covering Fresno, Madera and Tulare counties in California in 2010; and "Operation Full Court Press", covering the California counties of Colusa, Glenn, Lake, Mendocino, Tehama, and Trinity, targeting large scale, illegal marijuana grows in and around the Mendocino National Forest; Operation Full Court Press consisted of more than 300 personnel from 25 local, state, and federal agencies. Nearly a third of the illegal grow sites eradicated as part of "Operation Full Court Press" were on public lands managed by DOI. A dozen officers from the BLM and the FWS were involved daily. Of the 632,058 marijuana plants eradicated during the

operation, approximately 20 of the cultivation sites and over 100,000 plants eradicated were on BLM lands adjacent to the Mendocino National Forest.

### **Public and Employee Safety**

DOI personnel, both law enforcement and civilian, routinely run across marijuana grow sites, suspicious persons and smugglers across DOI lands. DTOs, particularly in marijuana cultivation sites, often have encampments and are armed. The remoteness of these areas often give the upper hand to the DTOs; particularly in marijuana grow sites where they have been encamped, possibly for several months, and know the lay of the land better than law enforcement. Assaults on visitors and civilian and law enforcement personnel have been documented. Hunters, fisherman, recreational users, researchers and maintenance personnel have reported grow sites, and several times a year report being harassed or threatened by armed individuals.

In 2010, there were seven law enforcement-involved shootings on public land grow sites, six in California and one in Oregon. Four growers were killed and the others arrested. Thankfully, no law enforcement personnel were injured.

### **Environmental Impact**

Marijuana cultivation site operators often contaminate and alter watersheds, clear-cut native vegetation, discard garbage and non-biodegradable materials at deserted sites, create wildfire hazards, and divert natural water courses. For example, cultivators often dam streams and redirect the water through plastic gravity-fed irrigation tubing to supply water to individual plants. The high demand for water often strains small streams and damages downstream vegetation that is dependent on consistent water flow. In addition, law enforcement officials are increasingly encountering dumpsites of highly toxic insecticides, chemical repellants, and poisons that are produced in Mexico, purchased by Mexican criminal groups, and transported into the country for use at their marijuana grow sites.

These toxic chemicals enter and contaminate ground water, pollute watersheds and can kill fish and other wildlife. Moreover, while preparing land for marijuana cultivation, growers commonly clear the forest understory, which allows nonnative plants to supplant native ones, adversely affecting the ecosystem. They also terrace the land--especially in mountainous areas--which results in rapid erosion. The cost of clean-up and restoration of the land can be extensive, particularly in remote wilderness locations and where cultural sites are impacted.

During “Operation Full Court Press”, more than 26 tons of trash, 40 miles of irrigation line, 5,445 pounds of fertilizer, and 260 pounds of pesticides and rodenticides were removed from grow sites.

As with law enforcement, these activities take resource management staff from their regular duties. In addition, the potential for encountering DTOs when conducting routine surveys, weed control, and resource monitoring requires additional coordination and use of law enforcement support.

## **Conclusion**

The stewardship of America’s natural resources and heritage and the safety of our visitors and employees is the DOI’s mission. The DOI is committed to accomplishing its mission, and is working with our other federal, state, and local partners in continuing to pursue cooperative strategies that will utilize resources more efficiently, provide for successful investigations, and support prosecutions that will hasten the decline of this blight on our public lands.