

ILLICIT MARIJUANA CULTIVATION:

The Exploitation of Public Lands in California

Our public lands are being encroached upon by illicit, large-scale marijuana cultivation operations that ravage the environment, destroy natural resources, and threaten public safety. It is a multi-billion-dollar industry in California.

Large-scale marijuana cultivation results in deforestation of natural vegetation, contamination and altered watersheds; diverted natural water courses; clear-cut native vegetation; poached protected wildlife; tons of discarded garbage, and creation wildfire hazards. Marijuana-related shootings and homicides continue to occur at an alarming rate. Just within the last three-month period, there have been at least seven *reported* shootings including fatal incidents involving marijuana-related activities in California.

Marijuana: A Brief Overview Dangers and Hazards

Marijuana cultivation is a lucrative crop, a crop that is protected using extreme and violent measures. Marijuana cultivators have demonstrated a propensity to arm themselves with a range of firearms as well as hidden traps designed to maim and kill. These traps are set to injure indiscriminately, not just law enforcement personnel or would-be thieves, but also hikers, campers, or innocent passersby. Examples of these traps include fish hooks strung in trees and bushes at eye level and this year, one device discovered in an outdoor marijuana cultivation site in Kern County was improvised from a rat trap, a shotgun shell and a trip wire. In addition this year there have been 9 known marijuana-related homicides that appear to be connected to cultivation activities.

Law Enforcement Efforts: Focused Operations

Over the last five consecutive years, multiple law enforcement, criminal justice, and military organizations within some of the state's most affected areas have engaged in multi-agency "focused operations," that target these grows on public lands. Analyses of the data associated with these operations indicate appreciable measures of success, such as downward trends in production; however, sustained success appears to be a product of perseverance.

The focused operations were conducted by combining local, state, and federal agencies. The basic structure of these operations generally consisted of a holistic approach of demand reduction, identifying organizations, eradication, highway interdiction, arrests and reclamation.

A considerable array of factors and strategies has proven effective in these focused operations, the vast majority of which would not have been available to the same degree or for

the same duration were it not for the considerable resources afforded by the federal government. These strategies include the implementation of: intensive eradication activities, priority investigations, strategic threat assessments, tactical intelligence support, HIDTA participation, undercover strategies, highway interdiction, Title 8 (illegal immigration) prosecutions, Title III wire interceptions, infrastructure removal, land reclamation, drug demand and reduction education, federal prosecutions, and National Guard participation. Each of the foregoing has been an essential element in these focused operations, but the assistance provided by the National Guard has been incalculable. National Guard contributions are extensive and include air assets, significant staffing, and planning, logistics, and intelligence support.

The success of these focused operations over the last few years is measurable. For instance in 2009 in Fresno County there were 81 identified grows sites on public lands. In 2010 that decreased to 19 and in 2011 there were only 8. In Fresno County in the last three years, the cumulative seizure totals include - the eradication of over 1 million marijuana plants arrests of over 230 suspects; the seizure of over 6,000 pounds of processed marijuana; and an important goal was reached, the reclamation of 100% of the grow sites on public lands.

Emerging Trend

As law enforcement continues to battle illegal marijuana cultivation operations on public lands, a new trend has emerged in the Central Valley. In 2010, a conspicuous shift in illicit marijuana cultivation and trafficking tactics materialized. Marijuana cultivators began a notable transition

from, figuratively, the backwoods to our backyards. Rather than growing marijuana in the relative secrecy and anonymity afforded by remote public lands many moved illicit operations on private agricultural lands. In years past, investigators had occasionally identified and eradicated marijuana being grown on the Valley floor, which was usually interspersed with legitimate crops in an attempt to conceal it from law enforcement, but it has now been taken one step further. Marijuana cultivators began growing massive, exclusively marijuana crops on the same private lands that have served as the foundation and sustained legacy of the Central Valley's national agricultural preeminence.

These cultivators now openly grow marijuana under the guise of the state "medical" marijuana laws. Fixtures within these grow sites are haphazardly erected shanties and structures. Some of these are used as makeshift living accommodations and other structures include elevated

platforms that serve as lookout towers on which armed gunmen have been observed guarding the marijuana. In 2010, 36 multi-acre marijuana cultivation sites were identified on the Valley floor in Fresno County, consisting of thousands of plants, which were situated in populated, semi-rural areas, and, in some instances, located within close proximity to elementary schools. A significant number of the people identified as being involved in these operations have prior criminal histories for involvement in drug trafficking, violence, and organized crime. In 2011, there have been 121 of these outdoor marijuana cultivation in Fresno County alone, an increase of over 300% from 2010.

Numerous investigations and sources of information have revealed that the professed “medical” premise for cultivating this marijuana is predominantly a ruse. Marijuana grown in these quantities is largely intended for distribution and sales, often to out-of-state destinations. Investigations have already

identified so called 'medical' marijuana from Fresno County being transported across our Nation and winding up in Texas, Utah, Illinois, Arkansas, Florida, Colorado, Tennessee, Washington DC, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Wisconsin. The costs associated with growing marijuana outdoors are relatively minimal, while the prices that harvested marijuana can garner, particularly outside of California, are substantial. Significant profits coupled with negligible risks make marijuana trafficking an appealing enterprise to many.

Illicit marijuana cultivation operations in California on both public and private lands increasingly pose risks to the environment, natural resources, wildlife, agriculture, and public safety. The dedication and determination demonstrated by local and federal law enforcement agencies in California in targeting illegal marijuana cultivation operations must be unwavering, now more than ever. The depletion of our natural resources, the devastation of our lands, the destruction of our

wildlife, the pollution of our water sources, and the deterioration of our public safety are unacceptable. It is critical that we continue to work together as we preserve our land and protect our citizens.

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