

Authorities join forces to eradicate public-land pot grows

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Federal, state, and local leaders on Tuesday joined with experts to highlight the devastating damage that illegal, public-land marijuana grows do to national forests, the wildlife who inhabit them, and the streams and waterways that flow through them.

Making the announcement were U.S. Attorney McGregor W. Scott; U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service Director of Law Enforcement and Investigations Tracy Perry; California Attorney General Xavier Becerra; U.S.D.A. Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Randy Moore; Integral Ecology Research Center Director Dr. Mourad Gabriel; California National Guard Maj. Gen. David Baldwin; Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mimms; Siskiyou County Sheriff Jon Lopey; and the Director of Highway Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program, Bill Ruzzamenti.

Every year, acres of marijuana are illegally planted throughout the nation's pristine public lands; the damage is widespread and long-lasting. While law enforcement have worked for years to eradicate these illegal marijuana grows, new data has emerged to show how they cause far-reaching harm to the environment and threaten public safety.

"Growing marijuana on federal lands is, and has always been, illegal, and the destruction it wreaks on the environment must be stopped," said U.S. Attorney Scott. "Our national parks and forests are priceless treasures held in trust for the public to enjoy for generations to come. But these assets are being destroyed by the criminal organizations that cultivate millions of marijuana plants on these lands each year for profit. The growing scientific evidence showing the depth and scale of this destruction to the forests, wildlife and waterways is a wake-up call that we must heed. My office is committed to raising awareness about this issue and joining with our partners to put an end to this profound problem."

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service Director of Law Enforcement and Investigations Tracy Perry stated, "The illegal cultivation of marijuana on National Forest System lands poses a significant risk to the public, to Forest Service employees, and to the environment. The Forest Service is committed to working in partnership with our federal, state and local cooperators to ensure that our National Forests are a safe place to visit and that our precious natural resources are protected for present and future generations."

Dr. Gabriel of the Integral Ecology Research Center said: "California now has contaminated water, soil, plants and wildlife due to the clandestine actions of those cultivating marijuana on our public lands. We are at a precipice where we can either ignore the prologue of the past

when public resources were illegally exploited for monetary gain or proactively conserve these national public lands for future generations to use and enjoy.”

Those who plant and tend the illegal grows use toxic fertilizers, pesticides, and rodenticides that find their way into the soil and streams, and consequently infect, poison, and kill plants and wildlife. Research shows that these poisons are carried away from the grow sites and are ingested by threatened species that are hunted and consumed by humans for food. One of the deadliest pesticides, carbofuran, which is banned on all crops grown for human consumption, has been increasingly used at these sites with experts finding signs of it at 78 percent of all known grow sites. According to Dr. Gabriel, of the Integral Ecology Research Center, who presented today, 70 percent of northern spotted owls, a federally listed species, tested positive for pesticides. The poisons also find their way into water supplies for towns and cities downstream.

Those responsible for the illegal cultivation also, leave behind piles of garbage and waste, including PVC pipes, irrigation lines, gardening tools and human waste, which add to the blight on these previously undisturbed habitats. In addition to the poison and waste, the cultivators divert water to the marijuana plants, drying up streams and reservoirs used for plants, animals and humans.

According to Dr. Gabriel, by even a conservative estimate, a single marijuana plant uses about six gallons of water per day. The 1.1 million illegal marijuana plants removed in California in 2016 would have used approximately 1.3 billion gallons of water, which is as much as the consumption of up to three months in the municipality of San Francisco.

According to HIDTA Director Ruzzamenti: “Many public land trespass marijuana cultivation sites and complexes are operated by drug trafficking organizations that are ultimately controlled by Mexican drug cartels. Every year, agents arrest scores of Mexican nationals illegally growing marijuana. While relatively few suspects talk to police, some do, and some claim to be affiliated with Mexican drug cartels, usually naming the Sinaloa Cartel. In 2017, an investigation of a public land marijuana grow site complex in Siskiyou County yielded indications of involvement by the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG or Jalisco New Generation).”

By bringing together subject matter experts, federal, state, and local law enforcement can reclaim illegal marijuana grow sites, and protect the environment and the public. These efforts will be supported by Congress’s recent appropriation of money to the Forest Service to use in combating this problem.