

NEWS RELEASE



OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

San Diego, California

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Around the state, officials today announced a multi-state, multi-agency operation known as Mountain Sweep which targeted marijuana on public lands in western states of California, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.

Since July 1, as part of Operation Mountain Sweep, law enforcement agents have eradicated over a half million marijuana plants on public lands in those seven states. According to DEA, the 578,000 plants that have been seized from public lands in these states thus far have a street value of more \$1.156 billion dollars. In California, officers had conducted enforcement operations at 96 illegal marijuana grow sites on public land, eradicating over 483,000 plants. Those did not include locations in San Diego; however, investigations here are ongoing.

“Marijuana trafficking organizations seek to turn our nation’s parks and public lands into their own drug havens,” said DEA Administrator Michele M. Leonhart. “Operation Mountain Sweep is a concerted effort to reclaim these wild and beautiful areas, and protect them from further destruction and exploitation. Thanks to the ongoing commitment of our federal, state and local law enforcement partners, we will continue to aggressively pursue and prosecute marijuana traffickers wherever they operate and hide.”

San Diego drug enforcement agents have located more than 500 illicit marijuana farms since 2007 in dense forest and park areas around the county - near Palomar Mountain, Cleveland National Forest, in agricultural areas between avocado groves and even within walking distance from Cal State University San Marcos. According to statistics released today, drug agents based in San Diego have seized 1.5 million marijuana plants valued at an estimated \$3 billion during that period.

But authorities have found more than pot plants.

They've also discovered the destruction of natural vegetation where drug lords have made way for crops, makeshift kitchens, sleeping areas and toilets for armed narco-farmers. Agents have also found hundreds of shotgun shells, miles of discarded drip irrigation lines, scores of empty plastic containers for illegal fertilizers, bug and weed sprays, and rat poisons smuggled across the border from Mexico. Many of these chemicals, so harmful they are banned in the U.S., seep into the ground and contaminate the local water supply, which in turn harms aquatic and wild life.

Also part of the sullied landscape were discarded stoves and propane canisters left behind from months of camping during the five-month growing season that ends in October. Agents have found car and motorcycle engines once used by growers to charge cell phone batteries pollute the landscape. And trash. Lots of trash.

"Despite individual convictions about marijuana use, as a community we need to consider the damage that mass cultivation inflicts on our precious natural resources," said U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy. "Most people likely have no idea how much marijuana is grown on public lands or that these grows are being operated at the expense of our pristine forests and parks."

This is the first season that San Diego law enforcers have used the statewide Cannabis Eradication and Reclamation Team to help eradicate and clean up the grow sites. So far they've helped clean up two marijuana gardens in the region, including the one behind Cal State San Marcos.

Some cleanup around the state is performed by trained volunteers from non-profit groups. Crews trained in hazardous materials removal often have to be lowered in and out of the grow site by cables attached to the bottom of a helicopter.

Shane Krogen, director of High Sierra Volunteer Trail Crew, which has cleaned up more than 300 grow sites in state and national parks throughout California, said one of the most disturbing sights he has encountered during a cleanup was that of fallen oak trees, cut down by drug traffickers so their marijuana plants could get more sun. His crews typically find trash, junk, sleeping bags, chemicals, discarded containers for fertilizers, pesticides and rodenticides, and miles of drip irrigation lines, among other things.

"I'm internally crying at the damage I've seen," he said. "If the people of California saw what was going on out here they would be up in arms. It's about the environment, not about whether pot should be legal. It doesn't matter if it's tomatoes. They're killing the wildlife out there. They're totally and completely abusing our land. That's the story that needs to be talked about."

A July 13 study by UC Davis scientists found considerable impact on wildlife. Rat poison from illegal marijuana farms is likely to blame for deaths of scores of weasel-like creatures called fishers, which are an endangered-species candidate. According to the study, researchers found commercial rodenticide in dead fishers in Humboldt County near Redwood National Park and in the southern Sierra Nevada in and around Yosemite National Park. Other species impacted include martens, owls and Sierra

Nevada red foxes, the study said. (For more information on the study, please see http://www.news.ucdavis.edu/search/news_detail.lasso?id=10287)

The largest marijuana farm in San Diego County in recent years was located in a remote area in the Cuyamaca Mountains. Eighty thousand plants with an estimated street value of \$160 million were seized. The most recent illegal farm was in the Warner Springs area, where 41,000 plants valued at \$82 million were seized in July.

For additional information regarding the campaign against marijuana planting, please contact Tommy Lanier, Director, National Marijuana Initiative, which is funded by the Whitehouse Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) at 619-548-4197 or by email laniert@cbag.hidta.org

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