

Eastern District of California

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U.S. Attorney's Report to the District

By U.S. Attorney Benjamin B. Wagner

The public owns millions of acres of State Park, National Park and National Forest lands in the Eastern District of California, including some of the most treasured public lands in the nation. But those lands, and the members of the public who use them, are increasingly at risk from armed criminal organizations in the marijuana cultivation business.

Target: Criminal Organizations

Sophisticated marijuana grows have been taking root on public lands in California at an alarming rate. Roughly three quarters of the marijuana plants seized in this state was found growing on public lands. This is not “medical marijuana” — but supplies the rest of the nation and generates huge profits for criminal organizations, many of which traffic in other drugs and have ties to Mexico. The number of marijuana plants eradicated in California increased nearly 300 percent from 2006 through 2009. For the sixth year in a row, a new record will be set for marijuana eradication in California.

Firearms — a Growing Danger

The armed groups who control these operations jeopardize the safety of law enforcement and of members of the public. Firearms of all types, including semi-automatic assault rifles, are recovered from marijuana gardens.

Shootouts leading to serious injuries and deaths are not uncommon.

But the most under-appreciated aspect of these marijuana grows is the damage to the environment. Growers cut down trees and other vegetation, terrace hillsides and install pvc pipe to facilitate their operations, which often involve thousands of plants spread over multiple acres. They divert streams and pour pesticides and fertilizers in water supplies and on the soil. They dump mounds of garbage in wilderness areas and kill wildlife. This office is committed both to assisting our rural law enforcement partners in confronting this public safety threat, and to protecting and preserving our public lands.

In July, this office participated in Operation Trident, a three-week, multi-agency enforcement effort that targeted large-scale marijuana cultivators in rural areas of Fresno, Tulare, and Madera Counties. Approximately half a million plants worth almost \$2 billion was eradicated during the operation. To date, our office has charged 58 individuals arrested during the operation for various narcotics, immigration and environmental offenses. Each week new criminal cases are filed arising from other marijuana grows around the district. With our support, law enforcement agencies are pursuing strategies designed to identify and disrupt the organizations which control and profit from these grows. The challenge posed by the drug trafficking organizations using our public lands is greater than ever, and our response must be equally robust.
