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## 10. PUBLIC LANDS: Marijuana eradication campaign yields a quarter-million plants (07/19/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

So far this month, a joint effort by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies has uncovered as many as 40 plots of land within North California's Shasta-Trinity National Forest and other public lands being used to grow marijuana. Two arrests have been announced, and officials say they have eradicated nearly 225,000 pot plants, with a street value approaching \$900 million.

In addition, agencies participating in the Operation Alesia marijuana eradication program are removing miles of irrigation piping, camping equipment, pesticides and trash from the sites on public lands in Shasta County.

The Northern California campaign found its way into the national spotlight last week with an appearance by John Walters, the director of National Drug Control Policy for the Bush administration, who told reporters that the hidden marijuana fields are largely being grown for the benefit of "organized crime, in this case, linked to the Mexican mafia."

Walters, known in media parlance as the nation's "drug czar," said, "They believe that by using public lands, they will not be caught. That's a big mistake."

According to U.S. Forest Service's regional forester for California, Bernie Weingardt, 80 percent of the marijuana crop grown within California is controlled by international drug trafficking organizations. He estimated that as much as 28,000 acres of Forest Service land in the state is affected, with adverse effects ranging from clear-cutting of trees to the use of pesticides and chemicals -- many of which are not available legally in the United States -- that are damaging rivers and streams.



Operation Alesia in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest coordinates marijuana eradication efforts by 17 state and federal agencies. So far this summer, nearly a quarter-million pot plants have been uncovered. Photo courtesy of the Operation Alesia Joint Information Center.

"No public land has escaped," Weingardt said, citing similar if less extensive discoveries of illegal growing in Yosemite National Park, at the Kings River National Forest, in wildlife refuges and on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Officials estimate that half of the illegal marijuana produced in the state is grown on public lands.

Shasta County Sheriff Tom Bosenko added that the same drug cartels behind the illegal crop also traffic in methamphetamine, cocaine and illegal weapons. "They are well-armed with handguns, shot guns and assault rifles," he said.

While there have been no direct confrontations reported this year, Bosenko said that in 2003 officers engaged in a gun battle with growers.

Bosenko is in charge of one of the nation's most aggressive eradication programs, and the Shasta program is the largest such effort to be organized by a local sheriff in coordination with 17 federal and state agencies that range from the Forest Service to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

"This is a concentrated effort to end an illegal and life threatening situation," Bosenko said. "We're taking back our public lands."

Shasta County is frequently among the top five regions in the national eradication effort, with results increasing on a yearly basis, he said. In 2001, there were 73,000 plants pulled in a similar local campaign, growing to over 240,000 last year.

At the time of the news conference last Thursday, Operation Alesia's take was about 70,000 plants in three days of searching. By yesterday, the Forest Service said that 223,239 plants had been eradicated. Officials use a metric that estimates each plant, if brought to maturity and sold, could yield as

much as \$4,000 -- meaning the program this year has already deprived growers of nearly \$900 million.

"We're making it more and more costly. Last year we took \$1 billion out of their hands," said Walters, who described the variety of cannabis being destroyed as far more powerful than most people realize. These plants are cloned for maximum potency, he said, designed to be all female with extremely high levels of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. He also linked the dealers to terrorists.

"Not only are they selling this poison to our teenagers, but they take the money back to buy guns and kill public officials," Walters claimed.

However, the allegations of direct involvement by such organizations are difficult to prove or disprove because -- at least so far -- there have been few arrests. When the officials held their news conference last week, there had been no arrests made as part of Operation Alesia. That changed this week, with the arrest of a 50-year-old, local resident on Monday.

Sgt. Janet Breshears of the Shasta County Sheriff's office admitted, "We don't know if he's affiliated with that organization."

Later in the week, another arrest was reported, as officials captured a juvenile male, who was described as originally coming from Mexico. No further information on his identity or possible criminal affiliation has been made available at this time.

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