



PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, September 6, 2007

8. PUBLIC LANDS: Forest Service makes pot eradication a top priority (09/06/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Visiting California last week, Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey had hoped to join in on a helicopter tour and raid of suspected marijuana growing operations in the Sequoia National Forest. Although bad weather grounded the operation that day, Rey signaled that the event was just part of a continuing campaign to eradicate illegal pot farms on public lands. "Without a doubt, illegal drug trafficking is the number one priority today in the U.S. Forest Service," Rey told reporters during a Fresno news conference Aug. 30.

To underscore the drive, Ron Pugh, a special agent with the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, issued a report documenting the effects of marijuana growing in national forests and offering a strategic plan for marshaling resources to halt the problem.

The plan is heavy on inter-agency cooperation of the sort witnessed in Northern California earlier this year as part of Operation Alesia ([Land Letter](#), July 19). That effort, though led by Shasta County Sheriff's Office, involved 15 agencies and some 400 law enforcement officers. In all, the campaign claimed to pull more than 280,000 plants and secure at least 52 plots of land where marijuana was found. According to the Shasta County Sheriff's Office, 65 percent of the take was discovered on Forest Service land.

Pugh described the current situation as "the widespread illegal occupation of our national forests by armed foreign nationals for the purpose of conducting criminal activities." The objection of the strategy, he added, is to "eliminate, disrupt and dismantle the leadership, command, control and financial infrastructure" of drug trafficking organizations through eradication and investigations.

While a lack of federal resources has in the past left much of the enforcement effort up to local officials, Pugh maintained that there has been a minimal effort to apprehend and prosecute those responsible. The few arrests that are made are generally at a lower level of organizations, engaged primarily with cultivation. "Statistics show that this approach has been less than effective," Pugh wrote. "Most people that have been involved with this issue for any time agree that we cannot just eradicate our way to success."

Instead, the strategic plan calls for reorganization of the eradication hierarchy, increasing staffing of agents and officers, improving the process for prioritizing investigations, better education and stronger emphasis on site remediation.

Reclamation is especially important to prevent an area from being used again and to help distinguish new sites from old ones. Pugh reported that such sites "almost always result in large quantities of trash, irrigation equipment, camping equipment and chemicals being left behind. The sites are also frequently damaged by brush cutting and landscape terracing.

Unfortunately, the remediation process is very labor intensive and costly, often requiring helicopter support to remove debris. "Unfortunately, USFS is not funded for this kind of work," he concluded.

Pugh indicated that both the Forest Service and Congress have begun to respond to the problem with more money, with about \$12 million in added funds this year that will bolster enforcement ranks in the region by 78 positions, including 50 officers, 18 special agents plus a supervisory agent, three patrol captains and six administrative assistants.

With more than 260 cultivation sites identified in California alone during 2006, Pugh wrote that it would be impossible to conduct full investigations of all. Among criteria for launching such investigations are whether local law enforcement will commit to delaying eradication until the investigation is complete, whether there is an association with an existing investigation, availability of resources and cases that might involve a special public interest.



Forest Service officials have declared war on illegal marijuana growing on public lands. The recent Operation Alesia in Northern California netted some 280,000 plants and secured scores of cultivation sites. Photo courtesy of Operation Alesia Joint Information Center.