

Officials find more than \$240 million in illegal marijuana

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKE COUNTY — In only the first week of summer operations to eradicate illegal marijuana, the Lake County Sheriff's Office and other local and state agencies have seized in the county more than 53,000 plants valued at more than \$240 million.

With such a start to the season, officials believe 2008 could match or surpass 2007, which proved a record-breaking year for illegal marijuana eradications both in Lake County and across the state.

Lt. Dave Garzoli of the Lake County Sheriff's Office reported Monday that the Sheriff's Marijuana Eradication Program kicked off its annual effort to eradicate illegal marijuana grows on July 7. The program is funded through federal grants.

Garzoli said in the first three days of eradication approximately 53,472 marijuana plants were found and destroyed in areas around Highland Springs Reservoir, the Glen Eden Trail head and White Rock Mountain.

Estimated street value of the marijuana seized is more than \$240 million, said Garzoli, a figure calculated at \$4,500 per pound at a 1-pound-per-plant yield.

The multi-agency effort includes participation from the state's California's Multi Jurisdictional Marijuana Eradication Task Force — known as the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, or CAMP — the Lakeport Police Department, Lake County Narcotics Task Force and the California Department of Fish and Game.

During the eradications officials found at least one firearm left behind when growers fled the area and in other sites located ammunition and shell casings, according to Garzoli.

Officials made no arrests during last week's eradications, Garzoli said. During the operations, one law enforcement officer suffered a heat-related injury and was transported to the hospital.

Based on the first week of operations, Garzoli said 2008 appears to be shaping up much like 2007 in terms of illicit marijuana finds.

Last year, Lake County led the state with the highest number of plants eradicated in a single season — 507,000, a state record — as Lake County News has reported. Plants were seized on private lands but public lands — primarily the Mendocino National Forest — proved a primary discovery area.

Statewide, more than 2.9 million plants were seized with an overall value of \$11.6 billion, the California Attorney General's Office reported.

Garzoli said virtually every illegal grow site discovered in Lake County last year had evidence that indicated that it was directed by Mexican organized crime. He said the sites almost always were inhabited by armed Hispanic growers and the environment surrounding these grow sites was devastated with trash, chemicals and plastic pipe.

The same conditions were discovered last week, he added.

Garzoli said the illicit grow sites discovered last week were located in extremely rugged terrain at elevations of 2,400 feet.

Because of the remoteness of the areas, Garzoli said efficient access to the grow sites was possible only by helicopter via a Short Term Airborne Operation, or STABO.

He said STABO is a technique in which two officers at a time are lifted on the end of a 100-foot rope by a helicopter and flown to and lowered into the marijuana grow site.

Once all officers are deployed on the ground, Garzoli said a search of the grow site for suspects is conducted. Once it's determined to be clear, they begin eradication, with the marijuana hauled out on the long line.

Once a garden is eradicated, the officers are then lifted to the next site, said Garzoli, continuing on until each illicit garden is destroyed.

The illegal grows on public lands haven't just been destructive to the environment, they've also posed safety hazards for the public and those working on public lands.

On the morning of July 10 firefighters battling the Soda Complex near Lake Pillsbury were patrolling the northern flank of the Mill Fire to identify areas where fire crews should put in containment lines, said Mendocino National Forest spokesperson Phebe Brown.

As they were traveling through the area, firefighters were confronted by two armed men who spoke to them in a threatening manner in a foreign language, she said.

Brown said the firefighters left the area and notified Forest Service law enforcement officials and the Lake County Sheriff's Office, who responded to the Lake Pillsbury area.

"Fire crews did not work that location for a day and a half until the area was secured by law enforcement for firefighter safety," said Brown.

Brown said neither the growers nor their weapons were discovered; however, officials located and eradicated a small illegal marijuana garden — consisting of 47 plants — on National Forest land in the Sanhedrin Wilderness.

She said law enforcement officials have continued to patrol the area since then while firefighters are on the line.

Garzoli said the illicit marijuana eradications will continue for the rest of the summer.

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