

Chairman Doug Ose
Opening Statement
“Drug Production on Public Lands – A Growing Problem”
October 10, 2003

Welcome to the beautiful Sequoia National Park. We are here today to examine the alarming increase of illegal drug production in our National parks and forests.

Over a century ago, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service were created to protect our Nation’s most pristine and historic lands for the enjoyment of Americans today, and for the enjoyment of the generations yet to come. We are here today because that very mission is threatened by rampant illegal drug cultivation on our public lands.

Lands that were once the epitome of natural beauty have become large-scale marijuana farms and toxic waste sites. Terraced hillsides and cannabis plants have replaced lush trees and foliage. Plastic irrigation tubing has overrun bubbling brooks and streams. And, human waste and litter have covered the organic forest floor. Yet, this is only part of the problem. Visitors, naturalists, and rangers, who were once able to roam the lands freely, are now in grave danger of being injured or killed by marijuana growers armed with AK-47s, handguns, and machetes.

For years, relatively small illegal drug operations have existed on our national lands. After September 11, 2001, however, our border security tightened significantly, and drug smugglers reacted by moving drug production from Mexico to the United States. Essentially, what were once small marijuana gardens planted by local residents are now large-scale marijuana and metamphetamine (“meth”) operations run by well-funded and armed Mexican drug cartels, who have found that it is easier and more economical to produce their drugs on American lands than to smuggle the bulk crop across the borders.

The fact that the hearing is being held in California, and specifically in Sequoia, is no accident. California’s mild climate, natural resources, and proximity to Mexico make it the perfect place for Mexican nationals to cultivate marijuana. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service (USDA/FS), in 2002, National Forests in California accounted for over 420,866 of the 597,797 marijuana plants eradicated nationwide. 50,000 of these plants were eradicated just up the road from here – in Sequoia National Forest. Similarly, in 2002, the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Park Service (DOI/NPS) eradicated 46,511 marijuana plants from its lands. Over 34,000 of these plants were found right here in the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

Currently, we are in the midst of the marijuana harvest season, which generally spans from April to October. Interagency task forces, comprised of Federal, State, and local agencies, have already begun to locate and eradicate several massive gardens on public lands. The first week of September, 13,675 marijuana plants were found in Sequoia National Park. Less than a week later, authorities found another 5,000 plants and a garden that was recently harvested. Together, the eradicated plants were valued at about \$74 million. Given the value of their crop, it is no surprise that the growers aggressively guard the camps.

Similarly, it is no surprise that the growers have little concern for the environmental damage they cause. Motivated by profit or fear of the drug cartels, growers backpack supplies deep into our public lands, and set-up camp on some of our most pristine and treasured lands. Once settled, the destruction begins. The land is cleared and terraced. Streams are diverted into miles of plastic irrigation tubing. Fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides, and rodent poison are applied, contaminating both the soil and water. Animals are poached for food and sport. And, literally tons of trash is accumulated in the camp. Eradication teams perform some remediation, but substantial damage often remains at discovered and undiscovered sites due to inadequate Federal and State funding and resources. Thus, it will be decades before these lands are restored to their original condition.

In addition to this destruction, drug production on public lands also increases the risk of forest fires. By cooking, smoking, and poaching in the thick vegetation, growers increase the potential for forest fires. Likewise, meth labs impose an inherent fire risk because of the presence of volatile chemicals and the potential for explosions. In 2001, 242 acres of forest were set ablaze and two firefighters were killed when a meth lab exploded in Mendocino County, California.

Despite the extent of the drug production problem, law enforcement units within Federal land management agencies are woefully ill equipped to handle the issue. Due to their inadequate resources, law enforcement units in USDA's Forest Service and DOI's National Park Service must rely on personnel and equipment from other units in these agencies, and on other Federal, State, and local entities. Although this type of collaboration is beneficial, it is usually complicated and may strain already understaffed agencies.

Today's hearing will examine the extent of illegal drug production on public lands, and will seek to determine what tools are needed to combat this ever-increasing problem. Key questions are whether current Federal and State budget and law enforcement allocations are adequate to address the issue; whether the priorities of the agencies adequately address or hamper eradication efforts; and, what Congressional assistance, if any, is needed to address the growing problem.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses. They include: Richard Martin, Superintendent, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, DOI/NPS; Arthur Gaffrey, Forest Supervisor, Sequoia National Forest, USDA/FS; Stephen C. Delgado, Special Agent in Charge, San Francisco Field Division, Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration; Val Jiminez, Special Agent Supervisor, and Commander, Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement; Lisa Mulz, Superintendent of Law Enforcement and Public Safety, California Department of Parks and Recreation; Captain David Williams, Tulare County Sheriff; and Joe Fontaine, Member, Board of Directors, Wilderness Watch.