

**Remarks by**

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**Before The**

**House Sub-Committee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources, and Regulatory Affairs**

**Regarding**

**Drug Production on Public Lands – A Growing Problem**

**Regarding Illegal Marijuana Grows on Public Lands**

**Sequoia Kings National Park, Fresno County, California**

**October 10, 2003**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, it is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss the significant problems that have emerged over the past three to five years in the commercial cultivation of marijuana and other drug-related problems on our public lands.

I am a twenty-year veteran of law enforcement. I have worked in a variety of assignments ranging from every aspect of narcotic enforcement, gang suppression, and border issues. For a two-year period, I was assigned as a Special Agent Supervisor for the California Foreign Prosecution Unit. One of the responsibilities of this unit is to interact between California and the Republic of Mexico to investigate criminals that travel between California and Mexico to conduct their illegal activities.

Currently, I am assigned as Operations Commander to the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, also known as CAMP. The CAMP program is a twenty-year-old program directed by the California Attorney General's Office, Division of Law Enforcement, Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement.

In recent years, the problem of commercial marijuana cultivation and other drug-related issues on our public lands has seen a significant and steady statistical increase to the point of reaching epidemic proportions.

Statistics compiled by CAMP have shown an increase throughout the past five years regarding commercial marijuana cultivation on our public lands. This epidemic of marijuana cultivation and other drug-related issues poses significant danger to the public and law enforcement. The steady increase in marijuana production on our public lands has also led to the increase of weapons seizures and arrests. CAMP has documented several gun-related incidents involving law enforcement and the unsuspecting general public.

CAMP season 2003 has been the most violent year on record. On September 16 of this year, CAMP personnel eradicated 33,250 marijuana plants at a garden in Shasta County. Prior to the eradication, two suspects in the garden assaulted local law enforcement officers and were killed. Three suspects remain at large. Two handguns and an SKS assault rifle were seized.

In Mendocino County on September 18, the body of a Hispanic male was found in a marijuana garden. The victim was murdered with a pick ax. On September 19, CAMP personnel eradicated 11,157 marijuana plants at a garden in Butte County. Prior to the eradication, two suspects assaulted local law enforcement officers and were killed. Two SKS assault rifles and one .38 pistol were seized. In summary, this CAMP season has seen the death of four heavily armed commercial marijuana cultivators who confronted and assaulted law enforcement officers when approached.

CAMP has not only seen and experienced the danger of major drug organizations cultivating large gardens on public lands, but also the devastating effects of environmental and ecosystems damage as seen by way of pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation equipment, and trash that is found on a daily basis. The long-term environmental impact of these cultivators is still to be established.

It is widely believed that after the 9/11 terrorists attacks, because of the increase in border security, many Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs), began looking to locations outside the Republic of Mexico, beyond the reach of border security and to the remote areas of the United States, specifically California. These DTOs were looking for production sites where methamphetamine and marijuana could be produced. This calculated move north by the DTOs also allowed them to experiment with other illicit crops. This was confirmed by the discovery this year, in the Fresno County area of California, of 40,000 opium poppies capable of producing 40 pounds of raw opium, which could be used to manufacture 40 pounds of tar heroin. This seizure is what I considered an eye opener to the law enforcement community.

### **What exactly is commercial marijuana cultivation?**

As early as 1985, the trend of commercial marijuana cultivation by Mexican drug organizations was first documented, and throughout the following years the trend slowly continued upward. However, it wasn't until the last five years where there has been an "explosion" of epidemic proportions in the public land portions of the state of California. Gardens that were seen to contain anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 plants have now ballooned to 5,000, 10,000, and, in some extremes, up to 30,000 or 40,000 plants per garden. As occurred just six days ago in Tulare County, a garden containing 76,200 plants was seized. A significant amount of these gardens have been located on public lands, such as national forests; national, state, and county parks; and land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management.

Usually, undocumented immigrants from Central America and the Republic of Mexico tend these gardens of marijuana. They are recruited to tend and guard the marijuana gardens and are paid a monthly wage. The gardens, which are normally started in the latter part of April, grow until the harvest time of late September and early October. The operation of these gardens is very labor intensive, in that literally miles of water hose is needed to keep the gardens irrigated. This irrigation hose, along with growing equipment, including timers, tools, stakes, planting pots, and chemicals such as fertilizer, rat poison, rat traps, and an occasional booby-trap, is then surreptitiously hand carried up to the grow sites hidden high in the upper elevations of our parks and forests.

If the garden is successful, the owner of the marijuana grow can then enjoy the gross profit of about \$4,000 per plant, which shows just how lucrative the business can be. The other issue is that once the garden has been harvested, all the equipment, pesticides, and traps are left discarded on the land – a hazard for man and beast.

During the past season, which coincidentally ended today, the CAMP program has eradicated in excess of 400,000 plants, seized over 40 firearms, and has been involved in or arrested over 35 subjects directly involved in marijuana cultivation. The significance of these numbers shows the severity of this epidemic; and although the figures appear to be bleak, realistically, I believe this epidemic can be controlled.

Through the years of CAMP operations, a majority of the plant counts and arrests were always located in the northern part of California. With the involvement of the Mexican DTOs, that is all changing. Law enforcement in the past had always looked at area residents as being involved in the local marijuana and methamphetamine production. Now we are all seeing the trend change.

## **Solution**

Because of the expanding cooperative effort between the CAMP program and its law enforcement partners, I believe this is one reason why this problem can be overcome. The CAMP program enjoys an excellent working relationship with the Drug Enforcement Administration, United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, California National Guard, California State Parks and state and local law enforcement. These partnerships are essential to the success in eradicating this problem. With additional funding, the CAMP program hopes to pay for an aggressive response in combating these DTO's.

A network of task force agents has been assigned statewide to work closely with local agencies to form investigative units that will target these criminal commercial enterprises operating on our public land and within our borders. Already, this newly implemented investigative component has been successful in ongoing investigations, assigning agents to assist with surveillance and other investigative needs. Through the California Bureau of Forensic Services, evidence analysis has also been made available.

With an increase in continued funding from the federal government, the CAMP program will enhance its services to the federal, state, and local agencies that it serves. The plan will include enhancing the investigative component, education through public awareness, law enforcement training for efficient use of manpower and officer safety, and more regional teams, with equipment support such as vehicles and aviation, so that the expected rise in calls for service can be met. It is believed that with this help, the scourge of marijuana cultivation on our public lands can be controlled.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, CAMP considers illegal commercial marijuana cultivation to be a threat to the public as well as the environment. Although this problem has reached epidemic proportions, it is still, I believe, controllable and can be brought under control with continued future funding by Congress, resulting in agencies working together closely to combat this problem. If nothing is done or things stay at the level they are now, this problem will significantly worsen. This year we know that there were local areas that were not serviced by CAMP because of manpower and time constraints. However, because we did receive some additional funding from several agencies we were able to extend the CAMP season, which allowed us to seize an additional 85,000 marijuana plants.

The commercial cultivation of marijuana on public lands has had a significant and devastating effect on the people of this country and, specifically, the state of California. CAMP while working closely with federal and local agencies aspires to help return our public lands to their intended use, which is the preservation of our natural resources and to the recreational enjoyment of our community. We appreciate your support and concern in this matter and look forward to working with this committee and Congress in order to prevent illegal commercial marijuana cultivation from destroying our public lands and the health and safety of our citizens.