Opening Statement

Chairman Mark Souder
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform

Joint Hearing with the Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources and Regulatory Affairs
Committee on Government Reform

"Drug Production on Public Lands—A Growing Problem"

October 10, 2003

Good morning and thank you all for coming. Today the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, which I chair, and the Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources and Regulatory Affairs, chaired by my friend and colleague Doug Ose, will examine the impact of illegal drug production on public lands.

Previous work by my Criminal Justice Subcommittee has alerted us to the problems the illegal drug trade has inflicted on our public lands. Since the summer of 2001, the Subcommittee has been making a comprehensive study of our nation's borders.* During that study, we have had the opportunity to hear from Interior Department personnel on the border, including at Big Bend National Park and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, about the dangers and resource damage created by Mexican cartels smuggling drugs through our public lands.

Today we come here to Sequoia National Park to discuss another scourge that drugs are wreaking on our country's lands. Here—as well as in other parks, forests and public lands—criminals are abusing the people's

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* A link to the Subcommittee's report, *Federal Law Enforcement at the Borders and Ports of Entry: Challenges and Solutions* (H. Rprt. No. 107-794), can be found on Congressman Souder's website, at www.house.gov/souder/terrorism.html.

property not as routes over which to transport their drugs but as the very resources with which they produce these drugs.

For decades, illegal drug production has taken place in our forests and parks. These used to be primarily small marijuana "gardens," grown by local residents. In recent years, however, this problem has expanded dramatically, as large-scale marijuana operations and methamphetamine labs have taken root in remote, less-visited areas on our public lands, where criminals hope to evade law enforcement officials responsible for extensive stretches of land.

Marijuana cultivation, in particular, has expanded exponentially, as organized drug trafficking cartels largely made up of Mexican nationals have created major marijuana farms in our parks, forests, and on other public lands. These so-called "gardens" are in reality very large plantations producing thousands of marijuana plants. Covert workers on these complexes have established campsites, living there while they nurse marijuana plants with chemical fertilizers and water diverted from natural sources, often producing marijuana plants with a very high THC content. These crops make the venture highly profitable, so workers are often armed to protect the gardens and have engaged in shootouts with law enforcement officials and even held innocent hikers at gunpoint.

Marijuana cultivation has particularly ravaged public lands here in California. Last year marijuana plant seizures in California's national forests accounted for over 70 percent of the marijuana plants seized in national forests across the country. Here in Sequoia National Park, marijuana cultivation has exploded in the past few years. The park, which had eradicated only about 700 marijuana plants in 2000, eradicated around 34,000 plants last year.

The problem extends beyond marijuana production, however. Meth producers are more and more often taking advantage of our public lands to make their drugs, and this June, a hiker in the Sierra National Forest stumbled upon a crop of opium poppies, apparently grown by members of an Asian criminal organization.

The American people have specially set aside parks, forests and other lands to treasure as part of our country's natural and cultural heritage. Drug producers setting up large-scale illegal farms and potentially

explosive labs threaten the environmental integrity of the lands Americans most want to protect. They erode the land as they cut down trees and dig up slopes to plant their crops. They set up miles of irrigation hose, diverting water from wildlife. They pollute wilderness areas with their fertilizers and other chemicals. And they leave behind mounds of waste in their campsites. Here at Sequoia National Park, three tons of trash were hauled out of marijuana campsites last year—and even that was not all of the trash growers left behind. The high costs and intensive labor required to remediate this damage often prevent the restoration of lands noted and enjoyed for their natural beauty.

Clearly, drug production presents a serious problem for law enforcement and the protection of our public lands. Today we welcome representatives of federal and state land management agencies, law enforcement officials, and concerned citizens to discuss the challenges faced in combating drug production.

We are pleased to be joined by representatives of several agencies whose law enforcement officials are confronted with balancing issues both of drug enforcement and of visitor and resource protection. Today we welcome Mr. Richard Martin, Superintendent here at Sequoia National Park and Kings Canyon National Park, representing the National Park Service; Mr. Arthur Gaffrey, Forest Supervisor at the Sequoia National Forest, representing the USDA Forest Service; and Mr. Stephen Delgado, Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco Field Division for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

It is also important to recognize that state and local governments are playing a major role in tackling this problem. We are pleased to be joined by Mr. Val Jiminez, Special Agent Supervisor and Commander of the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting for the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, and Captain David Williams of the Tulare County Sheriff's Department, to testify about state and local law enforcement's role in combating drug production on public lands. We also welcome Ms. Lisa Mulz of the California Department of Parks and Recreation to discuss how drug production has affected this state's lands. As drug production does significant harm to the environment, we are also pleased to be joined by Mr. Joe Fontaine of Wilderness Watch. We thank everyone for taking the time this morning to join us for this important hearing.