

# Pot 'cartels' a reality in rural Alameda County

By Aaron Swarts

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Posted: 02/19/2009 05:37:10 PM PST

LIVERMORE — The idea of foreign and domestic drug cartels guarding pot farms with heavily armed mercenaries may sound like the stuff of Hollywood, but for residents of rural Alameda County, such a scenario is a real-life concern.

Residents of the unincorporated areas around Livermore are working closely with the Alameda County Sheriff's department, starting with a meeting tonight, to regain control of their land through a large scale "neighborhood watch" program.

In this case, that "neighborhood" consists of thousands of acres of rural land.

"Last year a couple of sheriff's deputies showed up at my house and told me they identified from the air a marijuana farm on my neighbor's property run by a cartel," said area resident Michael McElfresh. "They had pictures of a guy with a scope and high-powered rifle guarding the crop, and I thought, 'Wow, shouldn't we be telling all of our neighbors about this?'"

That incident led to a community meeting last October. Now, with the marijuana growing season on the horizon, residents are once again huddling with sheriff's deputies to better understand the warning signs of drug activity.

"We need the community's help to find these growing areas," said Sgt. J.D. Nelson of the Alameda County Sheriff's Department. "They are a major concern because the guys running these operations make a lot of money, so they guard their sites pretty intently."

Nelson said there are a number of things to look for.

"If they notice water on their property being diverted or creeks at an unusually low level," Nelson said. "Also trails not made by animals and strange vehicles parked on the side of the road. These guys are often packing supplies in and out of the property."

Nelson added that residents should never confront an unknown person on their property.

"That is something they should leave to us," Nelson said. "Often these guys are pretty heavily armed and willing to protect their merchandise."

Chris Gray, chief of staff for County Supervisor Scott Haggerty, said the supervisor's office has heard a number of stories about marijuana growing operations in rural parts of the county.

"It's hard for people living out there because some of the smaller properties are around 100 acres and some of the bigger sites are over 1,000 acres with some very steep areas," he said. "So this has to be a team effort because people don't always know what is occurring on rural parts their property."

Haggerty recalled one resident, a widow in her 80s, living on a particularly large piece of land.

"It would have been nearly impossible for her to be aware of what was happening on parts of her property," Gray said. "That's why it is important for everyone to work together."

McElfresh said he hopes there will be a good turnout at the meeting, which, in a comic twist, is also a potluck, thus increasing the number of eyes on the lookout.

"We may be spread out, but we're a pretty close community, and we tend to look out for each other," he said. "Last time we did this, we had over 40 people, and hopefully we will get even more this time around."

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#### Livermore crime meeting

What: Meeting to discuss the problem of marijuana growing operations in rural Alameda County.

When: 6 p.m. tonight

Where: 11535 Mines Road, near the 7.3 mile marker. Those attending are encouraged to RSVP by calling 925-371-1401.