



MARIJUANA: A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Unabridged Report

California's Public Lands Are Threatened: Could parts of California's forests and other public lands be closed off to the public because they are too dangerous for people to use due to heavily armed Mexican drug cartel members? It is possible. Perhaps you are thinking "prove it!" Consider the following.

Recently the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife posted signs warning visitors to Arizona's Buenas Aeries Wildlife Recreation Area to beware of armed drug smugglers and human traffickers. Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu said that "public use of the area is not prudent. The violence against law enforcement officers and U.S. citizens has increased in the past four months, further underscoring the need to keep the 80 miles of border land off-limits to Americans."ⁱ In 2007 a significant portion of Whiskeytown National Recreational Area in Northern California was closed for a short time to ensure visitor safety due to the possibility of an outstanding suspect armed with a shotgun who fled from a marijuana grow site.

Marijuana and Violence Are International Partners: Marijuana is the greatest revenue source for Mexican drug cartels. In 2007 marijuana earned the cartels \$8.5 billion.ⁱⁱ The drug trade is so profitable that El Chapo Guzman head of the Sinaloa cartel was listed in Forbes Magazine as one of the world's billionaires in 2009.ⁱⁱⁱ But Guzman isn't a businessman; he's a ruthless cartel leader who issued orders to his followers to use deadly force to protect their drugs when challenged by rivals or authorities.^{iv} The Mexican cartels are at war with each other and with the Mexican Government. At least 23,000 people (in Mexico) have been killed in drug-related violence since December 2006.^v Expectations are that the violence will eventually spill over into the U.S. There are some indications that this may already be occurring. California law enforcement needs to be prepared for increasing violence. Few people in Northern California can forget that marijuana growers shot a man and his 8 year old son while they were hunting in El Dorado County in November 2000.

California's Drug Cartels and Marijuana Violence: California produces more marijuana from outdoor grow locations than any other state and may grow more marijuana than Mexico.^{vi} Nearly 80% of the grow locations are on public lands in this state and most are occupied by two or three illegal aliens. There were nearly 2,000 grows eradicated during 2009; it's possible that there were nearly 4,000 armed illegal aliens in the forests of this state last year. Nearly 90% of those arrested were from Michoacán Mexico. One news report said that the La Familia Michoacána cartel employs 65,000 farmers growing marijuana in Michoacán.^{vii} The LFM cartel may be the most violent and its associates may pose the greatest threat in California.



Law enforcement is at a disadvantage as the threats to the public's safety must be dealt with in the face of dwindling law enforcement resources. "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?'"^{viii} During the week of 6-21-10 the Shasta County Sheriff's Office had to issue reverse 911 telephone messages to citizens warning them of an armed marijuana grower who was fleeing from law enforcement.^{ix} Violence occurs within the marijuana grows as well. Consider these two events:

- On May 25, 2010 a body was found alongside a road in rural Tuolumne County. The 32 year old Mexican male came to the region illegally from Cotija, Michoacán to grow marijuana. His hands and feet were tied and the body wrapped in black plastic.
- On 10-7-09 a body was found alongside a road in San Bonito County near a marijuana grow complex. He came to California from Cotija, Michoacán. He apparently bled to death from 3 gunshot wounds, one of which was a contact wound to his face.

Since 2004, the Central Valley California HIDTA has been studying the escalating violence associated with the growing of cannabis throughout California. The increasing involvement of highly organized drug trafficking organizations protecting their investment or competing for territory and market share has elevated the dangers surrounding cannabis growing from "pot users merely growing their stash" to what the National Geographic News called it (a) "Marijuana War Smolders on U.S. Public Lands."^x The drug cartels have hired and trained killers and gang members to ensure their territorial control. The cartel members have already demonstrated a capacity for wanton brutality and nearly unspeakable viciousness in their battles with each other, the military and law enforcement in Mexico.

On June 15, 2010 rival gangs in a prison in Mexico's northwestern state of Sinaloa fought leaving 29 inmates dead.^{xi} This state is the base of operations for the Sinaloa Cartel which is active in California. On June 14, 2010 Mexican 15 police officers were killed in clashes with suspected drug gang members in the northern border state of Chihuahua. The Juarez Cartel controls part of the state of Chihuahua and is a member of the "Federation." The cartels comprising the Federation are active in California. An ambush in the State of Michoacán hit a federal police convoy as it was returning to Mexico City. Gunmen blocked the road with trucks and machine-gunned the police vehicles.^{xii} La Familia Michoacána is very active throughout California. Its associates are the dominant growers of marijuana in this state.



Marijuana Related Violence in California, 2007-2009:

2007:

July 17, 2007; Inyo County, a Bureau of Land Management and law enforcement surveillance of marijuana grow operation led to a confrontation with three individuals and shorts were fired by law enforcement officers. No injuries resulted.^{xiii}

July 25, 2007; Two burned bodies were found near a marijuana plantation where 50,000 plants were discovered in a nearby National Forest. The bodies were found following a wildfire in Inyo County.^{xiv}

August 7, 2007; Shots were fired by non-law enforcement individuals during a marijuana eradication operation in Sequoia & Kings National Parks...no injuries.^{xv}

August 8, 2007; Nevada County – A 3,600 marijuana plant grow site had tree carvings indicating that the Mexican Mafia street gang were in charge of that area according to the Sheriff.

August 24, 2007; About 100 acres of Tuolumne County mountain country burned after a marijuana farm caught fire and spread toward homes. There were four fires this season associated with marijuana grows said a Fire official. He said that the fire responses cost \$1.5 million and were started by “well-organized, well funded, dangerous people.”^{xvi}

August 29, 2007; Plumas County – A geology student conducting mineral research in the Rich Bar drainage region was accosted by a Spanish speaking man pointing a handgun at him motioning for him to come closer. Fearing for his life the student fled in a panic, fell down a cliff and ultimately notified the Sheriff’s office. Nearly 2,400 marijuana plants were found.^{xvii}

September 10, 2007; San Bernardino County – A gunman opened fire on officers raiding a large marijuana farm in the remote hills north of Fontana sparking a shootout that left the man dead. Two camouflaged men, possibly carrying automatic weapons, managed to elude capture.^{xviii}

September, 17, 2007; A 24 year old illegal alien Adan Ruiz was found in a sleeping bag alongside highway 154 in Santa Barbara County. He died from a bullet wound to the chest and the Sheriff announced that he was tied to drug cartel growing marijuana in the county.^{xix}

September 25, 2007; A man was shot while trying to steal marijuana from a backyard pot garden in Sacramento.^{xx}



October 4, 2007; Two Humboldt County Sheriff's Deputies were investigating a marijuana growing operation when a suspect armed with a shotgun confronted the two deputies. The armed suspect was shot and killed.^{xxi}

Summary of 2007 violent incidents on United States Forest Service lands in California included 5 acts of intimidation (where individuals became frightened when stumbled upon marijuana grow locations, drip lines, etc.) to the public; plus 3 deadly weapon assaults.

2008

In early April 2008, police responded to a Garberville residence where occupants reported three men broke into the house with a handgun, demanding money and marijuana, while threatening to kill the residents.

In late April 2008, police arrested two men on suspicion of breaking into a Eureka residence on Little Fairfield, where they allegedly assaulted the occupants of the home, before fleeing with electronics, a shotgun and marijuana.

July 3, 2008; a Hispanic male reported to BLM Rangers that he was fishing in the Pit River WSA and was confronted by seven adult Hispanic males. They tied him up with rope and released him after 4 hours. One of the suspects placed a 30-30 rifle near his head and fired one shot barely missing him. He was told to leave and say nothing and not to return or he would be killed. A marijuana grow containing 2,709 plants was subsequently found and eradicated on July 8, 2008.

July 19, 2008; National Park Service reports that 3 weeks earlier that Firefighters working the Soda Complex fire were shot at by marijuana growers using a .308 rifle. Another fire crew was run off "last Friday by growers during a burnout operation at about 2 AM." The growers were circling the crew causing the fire crew to retreat from the area to safety.

July 29, 2008; Law enforcement officers taking part in an eradication raid during Operation LOCCUST in Tulare County encountered a man in the marijuana grow who pointed a shotgun at them. Shots were fired and the individual surrendered. He was debriefed and said there had been 10 heavily armed individuals in the grow location.

August 2008; Tulare County – a man's body was found alongside a road in a sleeping bag. Reportedly he was killed in a marijuana garden dispute and driven about 50 miles away to where the body was found.

August 23, 2008; Fires were reported to the US Forest Service in Mendocino County. A helicopter responded and on arrival observed a Hispanic male dressed in camouflage clothing



waive him “off”, then lean over and start a fire. Fire crews and law enforcement responded. A Hispanic male was found near the fire’s origin and he admitted starting 2 fires which burned 50 acres. He worked in a marijuana grow with 3 accomplices he said.

September 12, 2008; Lake County – a missing man’s body was found in a shallow grave near a marijuana grow site. He died from several high velocity gunshot wounds. Reportedly he and others intended to steal the marijuana but a gunfight ensued. Police apprehended the marijuana growers who identified the location of the body.

In October 2008 in Garberville, police investigated an armed robbery of a residence on Timber Lane. According to reports from the Humboldt County Sheriff’s Office, the suspects allegedly entered the house, pointed a shotgun at the residents, who were holding a young baby, and demanded their marijuana. According to information, the suspects had mistakenly identified the residence as a grow house, and left shortly after learning there was no marijuana inside.

During November 2008, police began an investigation into an alleged armed grow-house robbery in McKinleyville. During the alleged robbery, one of the suspects was allegedly shot in the back, with a shotgun, by the resident of the property. The suspect was wounded, but survived the incident.

On December 3, 2008, Garrett Ryan Benson was shot and killed inside his home in Cutten. Police arrested two suspects, who have since been charged for their alleged roles in his murder. According to HCSO information, Benson had a large amount of marijuana growing and processed in the residence, which is a likely motive for the murder.

2008 violent incidents on United States Forest Service lands in California included 9 acts of intimidation where individuals became frightened when stumbled upon marijuana grow locations, drip lines, etc. Six of these were to USFS employees. Four (4) deadly weapons assaults occurred on USFS lands in the state during 2008 and in one case a citizen was injured.^{xxii}

2009

April 19, 2009; McKinleyville, Humboldt County – three suspects attempt a home invasion robbery of a house with a marijuana garden. Authorities report at least three people had been shot during suspected grow house robberies within the past six months.

April 21, 2009; Los Padres National Forest in Santa Barbara County – two campers staying in Aliso Park area stumbled upon marijuana plants. They were confronted by two Hispanic men who ordered that the campers not leave until the arrival of their boss who spoke English. Being afraid of their safety, the campers fled to their car. On their way out of the forest they were



suddenly chased by a man in a truck. They made it to safety and police arrested the vehicle's driver confiscating 5 high powered rifles.

May 7, 2009; The U.S. Forest Service issued a public notice cautioning summer hikers to be wary of illegal pot grows in the National Forest land. "It can be something that's quite dangerous, even deadly," said Forest Service Special Agent I in Charge Laura Mark.

June 5, 2009; An 18 year old Tehama County man was charged with homicide for the death of a Los Molinos man killed during a home invasion robbery in January (2009). A man and his wife were asleep at 2: 00am when four masked men broke into the home. The homeowner and his wife were forced to lay face down on the bed and he was shot in the process. A large amount of marijuana was stolen from the home.

June 16, 2009; Two subjects who shot and wounded two Lassen County Sheriff Deputies with an AK47 rifle were charged in Federal Court with manufacturing several thousand marijuana plants and other crimes. One of the assailants was killed when Deputies returned the gunfire. Four other men associated with the marijuana grow were arrested later.

August 8, 2009; Investigators said that marijuana growers with possible ties to Mexican drug cartels caused an 88,650 acre La Brea wildfire in northern Santa Barbara County. Authorities suspect that an unattended cooking cook stove may have started the fire which scorched more than 137 square miles of brush and timber and briefly threatened two ranches and homes. About 30,000 marijuana plants and a SK47 rifle were found near the origin of the blaze in the Los Padres National Forest.

September 18, 2009; Los Angeles County – A news report indicated that a team of hotshot firefighters working near a popular and badly burned recreational area high in the rigged San Gabriel mountains found singed waterlines with new water lines already lying alongside them. Fearing for their safety, the firefighters called the sheriff's department. Deputies arrested a Mexican national found hiding out with a rifle.

2009 Violent incident summary by the US Forest Service for Region 5 (California) noted there were 35 incidents of intimidation where individuals became frightened when then came upon marijuana grow locations, drip lines, etc. Thirty one (31) of these were to USFS employees. There were 8 deadly weapon assaults reported and 6 were to civilians and 2 assaults were upon US Forest Service employees.^{xxiii}

Law Enforcement officers working in these areas see first-hand the grave risks to the public posed by marijuana growers. The following is a sampling of actual; emails sent to the CVC



Central Valley California HIDTA
July 22, 2010

HIDTA Intelligence Fusion Center by law enforcement officers during 2009. Without question, these statements paint a first-hand picture of what is occurring in California's forests:



Madera County –

"#1) Lower Fish Creek Site (reported to you with one in custody & armed grower)... Two fishermen hiking in the area stumbled across a Hispanic Male (HM) with a rifle strapped across his back. He Fishermen stated the HM was fixing drip line and told them to get out of the area. The Fishermen complied and reported to USFS & Fish & Game."

#2) "Peckinpah site (reported to you).... Bow hunter in late August/early Sept ran into two armed HMA's who appeared to be tending a garden, told the bow hunter to leave, he complied and reported to USFS. We have eradicated gardens on this mountain every year; one was eradicated this year. USFS Agent flew the area and located a grow that had already been harvested."

#3) "Peckinpah site.....patch pirates moved into the garden site to collect remnants (of marijuana grow) prior to us even finishing the eradication operation. These subjects were seen by USFS Agent."

Source: USFS Agent

"1) 7/23/09 - A US Forest Service biologist was doing a survey in the Woodpecker Meadow area of the Domeland Wilderness area in Sequoia NF. He saw a water line coming out of a creek, then immediately saw marijuana plants just downstream. He then heard the sound of someone talking in Spanish on a radio. He started to walk away and two subjects began yelling at him in Spanish and pursued him for approximately 10 minutes. The employee was former military special ops and in good shape, so he was able to get away from the growers."

2) "8/5/09 A US Forest Service biologist was working in the Bull Run Creek area of Sequoia NF. When he returned to his vehicle there was a red Jeep blocking him in and two Hispanic subjects leaning against his vehicle. One of the subjects was well dressed and spoke English and the other one was Spanish speaking only and dressed in camo. The employee was asked why he was in the area and told several times not to return. The employee said it was apparent that he had been under surveillance while he worked in the area over a several day period."

3) "5/1/09 A hunter was hiking in to the White River drainage of Sequoia NF to get his hound dogs after they treed an animal. As he approached his dogs he saw a tent and two subjects dressed in camo. e called his dogs and started walking back to his truck. The two subjects followed him for several hundred yards up the hill, and then disappeared into the woods."



4) "8/25/9 - Two US Forest Service employees were working in the Bear Creek drainage of Sequoia NF when they saw a tent hidden in a thick patch of timber. The employees were approached by two Hispanic men dressed in camo who came from the area of the tent. The subjects started talking to the employees in Spanish. The employees quickly left the area and were not followed."

5) "On 7/22/09 a rancher was gathering cattle in the Spear Creek area of Sequoia NF when he saw a hammock hidden in the trees. He got off of his horse and saw marijuana plants growing in the brush below the hammock. No suspects were observed."

6) "Fishermen reported finding water lines in Nobe Young, McFarland and Parker Meadow Creeks over the summer."

7) "During the period from April 2009 to July 2009 US Forest Service firefighters at Democrat Fire Station reported hearing Spanish speaking voices at night walking by the station and also saw Hispanic subjects walking through the station compound on several occasions. The sightings stopped when 3 gardens were raided in the area on 8/19/09."

8) "On 8/2/08 a hunter located a water line in Ice House Creek when he was attempting to locate one of his dogs. The hunter said he felt he was being watched and immediately left the area."

9) "On 9/14/09 US Forest Service firefighters were working on a wildfire in the Nobe Young Creek drainage in Sequoia NF. At approximately 2200 hours a hot shot crew ran into a large grow while cutting fire line and backed out. I went out early the next morning and found the garden to be about 99% harvested. Evidence at scene suggested that the site was abandoned at least 1 week earlier when TCSO was doing overflights in the area. The site was not detected at that time. The fire eventually consumed the entire garden and water system."

Calveras County

"Some of the historical info is.... a 187(homicide) in a DTO grow near Copperopolis where we found a skull and worked the case back from the finding of the skull. In another grow during a different year we found a photo of a deceased presumably Mexican male lying dead inside of a grow etc. Most of my info is dated."

Ventura County –

"This person was hired to clean and trim the dried marijuana bud. He said he was promised \$200.00 per day and was scheduled to be in the grow for 5 days. He estimated there were about 15 people in the grow, all involved in the harvesting. Workers were



divided into teams, each supervised by an armed "foreman". Sleep schedules, eating schedules, and work hours were all designated by the foremen of the individual teams. Our guy went AWOL after seeing our copter buzz the garden. He did not indicate he was in any fear of the foremen for leaving, but was more in fear of being arrested. He thought the foremen were armed to protect the garden (presumably from pirates) and to intimidate the workers. He has lived in Los Angeles for several years and was hired by a friend of a friend. He made no mention of working off his trip to the U.S. We eradicated around 3000+ plants from this garden, plus 405 lbs of processed dope. Ultimately we got another 150 lbs and several more bodies, and connected them to another grow. I think we're finished for the year: 110,000 plants, 550 lbs of bud, and 22 arrests."

The Meaning for California: Marijuana is not a harmless organic plant as the proponents of legalization infer. In the past 3 years there have been 12 deaths associated with growing most of which were homicides. Marijuana growers started seven (7) forest fires and one of the wildfires burned over 150 square miles of forests threatening homes and people. There were over 50 different incidents where forest works, hikers and campers reported being frightened when they came upon marijuana growing operations and 20 bodily assaults were reported during this period. Many other violent acts occurred that went unreported due to fear of reprisals. Law enforcement officers encountered armed and violent individuals on 5 different occasions; several of these involved exchanges of gunfire.

The 2010 outdoor marijuana eradication season began with a spate of violent incidents. The following recap is current of July 1st yet there are 4 months remaining in the growing season. The events included:

- April 27, 2010: A marijuana grower in Mariposa County was shot in the chest by another Hispanic male grower
- May 25, 2010; A marijuana growers body was found wrapped in black plastic alongside a road in Tuolumne County.
- June 29, 2010; Napa County Deputies were confronted by an armed suspect in remote marijuana grow site; the individual was shot and killed.
- June 29, 2010; A Mendocino County Deputy Sheriff was driving his vehicle following the eradication of 22,000 marijuana plants when someone shot out his rear window.
- July 21, 2010 – Santa Clara and Alameda County deputies show and killed a marijuana grower during a raid on marijuana grow site which the deceased was operating. Reportedly the suspect aimed a weapon at the deputies.

We can expect the violence in California to continue. It may in fact escalate when drug cartels vie for control of this billion dollar industry and scare law enforcement resources will be hard-



pressed to control it. This month, the members of the Nogales (AZ) Police Department are under death threats from Mexican drug cartels because they seized a large load of marijuana from smugglers while in a off-duty status. “The cartel’s belief is that when officers are not in uniform, they should look away and not do their job.”^{xxiv} Several of the Mexican drug cartels already have a strong foothold in California. As the user base of marijuana increases, so does the profitability of growing and distributing the drug by criminal enterprises. California may be destined for future that somewhat mirrors the drug strife in Mexico.

Questions or Comments: Contact the Central Valley High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, P. O./ Box 2768, Rancho Cordova, 95741. Executive Director Bill Ruzzamenti, 916 876 7006.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid
- ^{iv} Sinaloa Cartel May Resort to Deadly Force in U.S., Los Angeles Times, May 6, 2009
- ^v Calderon calls on Mexicans to unite against criminal gangs, www.latimes.com, June 30, 2010
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- ^{ix} Interview with Shasta County Sheriff’s Sergeant Steve Solus
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