

L.O.C.C.U.S.T.

Locating Organized Cannabis Cultivators Using Saturation Tactics

15 August 2008

Eric Hamilton

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¹\$Header: d:/Loccust/RCS/Loccust.tex,v 1.7 2008-08-15 09:30:59-07 Hamilton Exp Hamilton \$

1 L.O.C.C.U.S.T. and Me

“Did I tell you how much I love you?”

1.1 Background

During the end of July and the start of August 2008 the HSVTC had a cooperative Marijuana Garden clean up trip. We were working with the Tulare Sheriff’s Office. Our primary point of contact was Sheriff Deputy Scott Logue.

In spring I got an offer to work really hard for one or two weeks or maybe to drive a truck. I agreed to the two week option of truck driving and occasional hard work in the dope fields. This required that I use two weeks of my vacation time. At the time I wasn’t told where the work would be done.

I, and many of the other volunteers, had been doing grow site restoration since the HSVTC first started doing it four years ago. We have a reasonably accurate idea of what to expect and how we would be treated as volunteers. We were disappointed on this trip. All of the volunteers had a mind set that said “If you commit to do a job, DO IT.”

In the week preceding the trip, I took special classes at the local USFS office and got my government driver’s license. I also went down to the Clovis Police Department and was fingerprinted and a background check was made by the FBI and DOJ. (I passed.) I then made several upgrades to my equipment. This included new glasses and special clothes for working on the operation.

There are several appendices to this note. The first one is a description of the unique Park Police that were our guard force. There is a copy of a newspaper article and press releases that I found on the net.

1.2 Non-problems, the Good Things

1. The guard team was very professional and did a great job. The guard members were all in their high 20s to low 30s, with most having had previous military service, and were in great physical shape. As the trip went on they successfully “bonded” with us and we got along great. On what we thought was the last day, we gave them a green-yellow T shirt each.

They did more difficult work than we did as they went in with a pistol and an M4 rifle/carbine. They also had on body armor and carried at least 50+ lbs of stuff with them. In addition to the extra equipment that they carried, they kept a protective screen around us while hiking in. When in the dope field they helped us in collecting trash/drip.

As a part of the guard team there were “PJ”’s that were Parachute Jumper type medics. It was the PJs who were able to give us intravenous liquids in the field when we got hit with heat exhaustion.

2. On several occasions, wives of some of the volunteers came by to feed us as we had no full-time cooks with us. On three nights we went to town and bought dinner.

²\$Header: d:/Loccust/RCS/Lstat.inc,v 1.7 2008-08-15 09:31:00-07 Hamilton Exp Hamilton \$

3. It was nice to have the two rented trucks.
4. We always had enough bottled water³ available in the barracks. When in the field, and when the Blackhawks were flying, we got more chilled water delivered to us.
5. At the trail head, the Sheriff's group provided chilled water as we came out of each day's operation.

1.3 Problems, the Bad Things

1.3.1 Broken Promises, Very Bad

1. One of the more interesting things about the whole trip was a chance to learn how to STABO into a site. This involves hanging on a rope outside a helicopter. (Sometimes called "dope on a rope".) In the one or two days before the trip started, we got news that Lt. Col. Kelly would not allow us to STABO in. This caused at least five volunteers to drop out of the trip. It also resulted in our having to hike up/down steep non-trails in the heat of the day into the dope sites.
2. The volunteers made a significant effort⁴ to attend the event. The LOCCUST management team made it difficult for us to work. Volunteers were made to wait until the sun came up and it started to get hot, before allowing us to start in on the long hike to the dope fields. This increased injuries and problems with heat exhaustion.
3. Eventually the LOCCUST management team just didn't let us go in at all! This occurred after having us drive over two hours, waiting for three hours more and then telling us that we wouldn't be going in at all. On this day, the 7th of August, I took BIG BOY 1 up to a USFS fire station and waited until 3:30 PM before being released for the day. The rest of the team had been released at about noon. As can be seen in the chronology that follows, this was just about the last straw.

1.3.2 General Problems

1. When we got to the barracks, we found that it was quite dirty and the complete crew spent the next few hours in cleaning it up.
2. We had to provide cots for our sleeping. In the barracks, in my room, the room was so small that it was difficult for two of us to move around. So we coordinated getting up, etc.
3. On one day the urinal over flowed and part of the team had to dry out the floor in the barracks building.

³This includes electrolyte replacement fluids such as Gator-ade.

⁴Some of us had to take our annual vacation, others had to have neighbors mind their crops, etc.

4. In the La Paloma location, they had Air-conditioning. While at the barracks we had two swamp-coolers. There was no indication that the swamp-coolers had been serviced since the barracks were last used and they were quite noisy. (2006, or so)

1.3.3 Trucks, Minor Problem with some Pluses

We had three groups of trucks, they were:

1. Forest Service trucks from the Sierra National Forest. There were at least three of these and we used them as little as possible. They were all various types of pick-up trucks.
2. The LOCCUST management rented two five passenger pick-up trucks from Enterprise for us to use. As this work was being done in the Sequoia Forest area, we attempted to use these for most of the “small truck” work.
3. We had three older M35 model military 2 1/2 ton, six wheel drive diesel trucks with trailers. None of these trucks was in perfect condition. All of them were noisy, hot, large and slow with maximum speeds that were in the 40’s MPH. On one occasion the CHP pulled us over and asked us if we could keep the trucks running at closer to 55 MPH!
 - On “BIG BOY 1” most things worked with some wheel seals leaking. (An M35A3 model “805”.)
 - On “BIG BOY 2” there were no headlights, no parking break, and some wheel seals leaking and it was impossible to turn the heater off. (An M35A3 model “D-81”.)
 - On “BIG BOY 3” the transfer case was leaking oil, one head light burnt out, and we did not take it into the field. (An M35A2 model.)

BIG BOY 3 went back to Clovis at the end of the first week.

1.3.4 Communications, Constant Minor Problem

During the operation communications were not well done. The following were specific problems:

1. The different groups could not communicate directly with each other. On the 29th of July our guard group was telling an intermediary to “Have the helicopter change to 390.9 MHz” so that they could talk to them while the Blackhawk was picking up stuff in the dope field.
2. The radios in the trucks operated on a frequency that is an important frequency in the Sequoia National Forest, but is a minor frequency in the Sierra National Forest. What this implies is that channel 5 in Sequoia was automatically retransmitted all through the Sequoia Forest area, while in the Sierra Forest area it is a “line of sight” frequency and is therefore semi-private. This caused problems when attempting to do routine coordination between vehicles while driving to a work location.

3. Most radio communications were done on VHF or UHF frequencies. The result was that when we were working the dope sites, it was not always possible to communicate to the sheriff's deputies who remained back at the trail head. Frequencies in the VHF and UHF travel in line of site paths and could not go around the various valleys/ridges that we were working in. If available, lower frequencies would have been much better. At one point, officers had to climb a different wall of the canyon that we were going up in so that he could relay messages between the various groups. (Something in the 20 MHz band would have been best for communications.)
4. For this trip the team in that went into the dope fields had "RACAL" radios issued to them. These radios were not able to communicate with the M35 trucks.
5. At the Springville barracks the phone was a sometime thing. We could call out but it was difficult for people call in. In addition, the area is only served by AT&T for cell phone service. To help the others on the team, I let several co-workers use my cell phone and had them give my number out to their wives and family. That way if an emergency happened at home, there was a way for them to get a message.

The phone in the barracks would ring for a small number of rings, if someone got it during the first one or two rings, then there would be someone there. Otherwise when the phone was picked up, all we got was a dial tone. It seems as though there was an answering machine that automatically picked up the line very quickly, or something. The one time that I got the phone, it was a relayed request from Don Jensen (781-5780) to take a M35 up two hours early to pick up trash.

6. Roy _____ (I forgot his last name) had to come up to the barracks to get information about our injuries. While there, I gave him my cell phone number and when we had a problem with one of our small trucks, he called me directly and gave me information to get a replacement vehicle to the trail head. (Using the barracks phone simply did not work.)

1.4 **Brief Chronology of the Trip, as I saw it**

In the following items, the temperature is from Porterville because finding the actual temperatures at the sites was difficult due to the lack of instrumentation in those locations.

The Porterville Weather station is located at: Lat: N 36° 5' 20", Lon: W 119° 3' 27", Elev: 415ft

It should be remembered that a "typical day" started around 3:00 AM and ended up between 4:00 and 5:00 PM. Some longer days happened.

1. **26JUL Saturday** Maximum temperature 102.0°F

Arrive at trail crew storage early to start driving the M35 trucks down to Springville. The M35s have no air conditioning and are quite noisy.

2. **27JUL Sunday** Maximum temperature 99.1°F

Took a test drive to Camp Nelson and then returned to the barracks. Next we had to attend a 1:00 PM meeting in Visalia about the operation and meet our security detail of about 10 Park Police. That night “BIG BOY 1”, the other M35, was given a special job of going out very early the next day on a “special” trip. We next saw them late on the following Monday.

3. **28JUL Monday** Maximum temperature 96.8°F

The other of the M35s, “BIG BOY 2” the one that I was in, went up to a heli-port just inside the southern entry way to Sequoia National Park. We stayed there until a Blackhawk helicopter came in after lunch and dropped off about 1/2 a trailer’s worth of trash and drip line. The Blackhawk crew required that we immediately unload the cargo net and return the net to them before they took off again.

The restoration team went in to a difficult and very dusty dope site that had been raided a few months earlier. Most of the rest of the dope sites that we worked in had been raided the day before.

On the way into the dope site one of the guard detail messed up her knee and was never back working with us. She went directly to the hospital and rumor had it that she was getting “pins” put in her knee.

- Cost: One guard member down, one case of volunteer heat exhaustion and a mostly unneeded M35 truck trip. (A pickup would have been more appropriate.)

4. **29JUL Tuesday** Maximum temperature 78.3°F

This day only BIG BOY 1 was needed. The other BIG BOY 2 driver, and I, decided to “go in” and work in the dope field. We were told that it was “only .82 miles” in. We could look at the terrain and see that it was a quite steep .82 miles.

This was the first time that I was able to observe the guard detail in action. They were very professional and kept a guard “ring” around us at all times. However, they were not “forest people” but rather they were “city people” and they had real problems following totally unmarked trails in the hills. (I, and most of the rest of the volunteers, had been going through the hills for over 20 years.)

When we finally got into the dope field, we started to clean up everything. From what I had heard from the Monday work, I expected that the guard team would just sit around and watch us work. This time about 1/2 of the guard team actively helped us pull and roll drip. It seems as though they were beginning to think that we were somewhat better than “just a bunch of old guys”. (Our average age was somewhere in the 50s.)

- Cost: Another volunteer had a problem with heat exhaustion.
- Non-cost: The guard team is getting a better idea of just exactly who/what we are.

5. **30JUL Wednesday** Maximum temperature 97.4°F

BIG BOY 2 drove for about 2 hours to get the drip line that had been removed the day before. The rest of the team went in to clean up a dope site. The dope site was difficult to get into. By this time the guards were helping us in a significant way. They seem to believe that we were all in this together and that we could use a little help.

- Cost: One of the guards ended up the next day with a leg brace and another guard ended up with multiple stitches from barbed wire.
- Non-cost: We had “bonded” successfully with our guards.

6. **31JUL Thursday** Maximum temperature 99.8°F

Today we drove BIG BOY 2 for about 2 hours to get more drip. This time the restoration team could not find the full dope site. They had been given the wrong GPS coordinates.

- Cost: One of the volunteers had heat exhaustion and had to be heli-lifted to the Visalia hospital.
- Non-cost: Very successful operations with the very professional guards that lasted the rest of the trip.

7. **1AUG Friday** Maximum temperature 98.5°F

Another day with difficult access to the dope site.

- Non-cost: No additional medical problems.

8. **2AUG Saturday** Maximum temperature 99.4°F

Scott called Friday night and said that he was going to cancel Saturday’s work. He said that he thought that we should be heli-lifted into the next site and that he, with a small team, would go in early to the next site with chain saws and clear a landing site on Monday.

- Cost: No work done.
- Non-cost: Almost everyone got a day, or two off and went home until Sunday night.

9. **3AUG Sunday** Maximum temperature 100.4°F

I stayed over the Saturday night and everyone else came back from their break. Several people left for the rest of the trip on Saturday, as planned, and several new people replaced them.

- Cost: No work done.
- Non-cost: A rejuvenated team was ready for work, but we were down to only one M35 truck driver.

10. **4AUG Monday** Maximum temperature 76.9°F

We went to the Three Rivers area and drove up various narrow roads until we got to a place where everyone could park and the Blackhawk could land. Then Scott and his team, of himself and four others, took two chain saws into the dope site and cleared a place for the Blackhawk to land. This took about 30 mins.

About 2 1/2 hours later, near noon, Scott canceled the whole day's work and sent us home. Talking to Scott later on he said that the reason we could not get a Blackhawk to lift us into the dope site was that "ours" was being used for joy rides by the office staff.

- Cost: An unhappy team, due to no work being done.
- Non-cost: No injuries.

11. **5AUG Tuesday** Maximum temperature 100.7°F

We went into the California Hot Springs area and removed some drip/trash from the dope site.

- Non-cost: No injuries.

12. **6AUG Wednesday** Maximum temperature "no record"

We went into an especially difficult area and got a medium amount of drip/trash out. The area was very steep and we were out by about 1 PM.

- Cost: An unhappy team, due to the small amount of work being done.
- Non-cost: No injuries.

13. **7AUG Thursday** Maximum temperature 102.6°F

We returned to the same place as we were in on Wednesday. This time we had rock climbing gear and used it for access to some of the locations. We got a medium amount of drip/trash out.

One of our small trucks had a broken part and had to be replaced. We were out by noon.

That night Shane decided that we had been consistently shown no respect and gave the LOCCUST management team an hour to get us something useful to do or we would cancel out. They called back in less than an hour and saying that they could not find anything reasonable to do. So, at about 6 PM we quit.

We started to pack up at around 6 PM and were about 80% packed by bed time. Most of the team went home with enough of us staying around to finish packing and to drive the remaining trucks back to Clovis.

- Cost: An unhappy team, due to the small amount of work being done.
- Non-cost: No injuries.

14. **8AUG Friday** Maximum temperature 101.5°F

Finished packing and returned to Clovis.

- Cost: An unhappy team. We were ready and able to work, but weren't given a chance.
- Non-cost: No injuries.

15. **9AUG Saturday** Maximum temperature 97.6°F

Had quit, missed the “victory barbecue” in Visalia.

- Cost: An unhappy team. We were ready and able to work, but weren't given a chance.
- Non-cost: No injuries.

A United States Park Police

The United States Park Police is a unit of the Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Capitol Region, with jurisdiction in all National Park Service areas and certain other Federal/State lands.

The history of the Park Police predates both the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. Created in 1791 by our first president, George Washington, the U. S. Park Police have been on duty in our Federal parks for more than 200 years.

Originally, the authority of the “Park Watchmen”, as they were known, was restricted to Federal property in the District of Columbia. In 1882, the Park Watchmen were given the same “powers and duties” as the Metropolitan Police in the District. Since then, the duties of the U. S. Park Police have been synonymous with that of an urban police department.

The expansion of police authority and responsibility of the U. S. Park Police outside the District of Columbia began in 1929 with the assignment of officers to the George Washington Memorial Parkway. The U. S. Park Police have responsibilities for providing law enforcement services within the District of Columbia as well as other Federal reservations, in the Washington metropolitan area, New York and San Francisco, They are also frequently requested to provide protection for dignitaries, such as the President of the United States and visiting foreign heads of state, and assistance to other areas of the National Park Service and other law enforcement agencies during law enforcement emergencies.

Initial appointments are made to the Washington metropolitan area where the largest contingent of officers is located. Officers may be reassigned to the Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City or to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the city of San Francisco, California. Officers may also be detailed to duty in any area of the National Park Service.

Each Officer of the U. S. Park police is charged with the responsibility of providing law enforcement services which includes the investigation and detention of persons suspected of committing offenses against the United States. Additionally, law enforcement services are provided for the many notable civic events conducted within the National Park Service.

This was taken from the Park Police’s web site.

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B Operation LOCCUST

Multi-agency investigation results in 36 arrests and \$1.4 billion in eradicated marijuana plants.

Tuesday, August 12 2008

By: Sequoia National Forest

Tulare County, CA., August 5, 2008 - John Walters, the Director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy joined agency heads from the Tulare County Sheriff's Office, California National Guard, land management and law enforcement agencies on Tuesday August 5, 2008 to announce Operation LOCCUST, an ongoing marijuana eradication effort being conducted throughout Tulare County which has led to 36 arrests and approximately \$1.4 billion in marijuana plants seized. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies arrested several members of a drug trafficking organization that was involved in a large scale marijuana growing operation.

The Nation's Drug Czar, John Walters, said, "The violence and destruction associated with the marijuana trade are increasingly apparent throughout our system of State and Federal lands. Operation LOCCUST is successfully pushing back against the dangerous drug cartels that have infiltrated our public lands, as well as the demand for marijuana that fuels their criminal enterprises."

In 2007, the Tulare County Sheriff's Office had a record year of eradicated marijuana plants, with a total of 330,693 marijuana plants eradicated in Tulare County. In the first seven days of Operation LOCCUST, the eradicated plant count has surpassed this record year with a total of 340,685. Additionally, the operation has seized 138 lbs of processed marijuana, \$6,900 in cash, 27 weapons; three vehicles, 32 cases initiated, 12 search warrants served, and resulted in the arrest of 36 suspects associated with marijuana grow sites.

The progress of Operation LOCCUST can be attributed to the coordination and planning efforts involving a coalition of 14 state, local and federal agencies, dedicated to the removal of marijuana, investigation and apprehension of drug trafficking individuals. In addition, Operation LOCCUST has dedicated resources to the removal of infrastructure, hazardous material, garbage and waste left on public lands from these marijuana growers. The operation consists of over 240 personnel from the 14 state, local and federal agencies.

"I am impressed with the way these agencies have worked together in planning and coordinating this operation," commented Sheriff Bill Wittman. "This has set a standard for future large scale collaborations and can be used as model throughout the state."

Beginning in November 2007, law enforcement officers from state, federal, and local agencies initiated resources for investigations into drug trafficking organizations involved in large scale marijuana grow site operations. During the course of these investigations, law enforcement officers identified 83 illegal marijuana grow sites.

⁶\$Header: d:/Loccust/RCS/YubaNet.inc,v 1.3 2008-08-13 08:18:21-07 Hamilton Exp Hamilton \$

As an example of these investigations, officials arrested four (4) suspects in the Ames Hole Gardens. The arrested suspects ranged in ages 22-24 years old. Approximately 7,600 marijuana plants and 78 pounds of processed marijuana were found at this location.

As a result of the Pine Creek investigation, officers arrested eight (8) suspects during a traffic stop along Yokohl Valley Road in Tulare County. The occupants of the vehicle were 19-48 years old and were armed.

An investigation lead by the Tulare County Sheriff's Office, along with the coalition, resulted in the arrest of 6 suspects and an eradication of over 80,000 plants in the mountain area east of Exeter. This case is ongoing.

Additionally, agents lead by the Cal. Dept. of Fish and Game arrested six (6) suspects in the Canebrake Ecological Reserve along the Tulare County Kern County border. These individuals were 20-58 years old.

The suspects were booked on charges including cultivation of marijuana, possession of marijuana for sale, child endangerment, possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, and conspiracy.

Law enforcement agencies in central and northern California have identified several marijuana grow sites located in the state's foothills and mountain areas controlled by drug trafficking organizations. With such a large number of these grows found in recent years, law enforcement has dedicated resources to the investigation, reclamation, and investigations to control this illegal activity.

Eradication and reclamation teams, along with a volunteer crew strive to remove irrigation lines, contaminants and trash from the land, streams and rivers. Removal of this material will help restore the land to its natural state and will remove the infrastructure which is imperative to deter drug trafficking organizations from reestablishing their operations. This process is the first stage of the restoration process and can typically exceed \$11,000 per acre.

To date, Operation LOCCUST has reclaimed 33% of the grow sites that have been eradicated during this operation. Over 245 trash bags, 14 dump truck loads (14,500 lbs), 29 cargo nets (5,000 lbs each) of waste which included 26.9 miles of irrigation pipe, 1,824 lbs of fertilizer, 22 lbs of pesticides, and 30 gallons of liquid chemicals have been removed from these grow sites. It has been proven that one acre of marijuana plants has a negative environmental impact on approximately 15 acres of adjacent land. Operation LOCCUST has a goal of reaching a minimum of 40% of reclamation during the operational phase with additional reclamation scheduled for the winter months.

Comments:

Jim

10 Aug 2008, 23:43

Unfortunately the officials in charge are not as concerned with the reclamation and removal of infrastructure as they claim to be. I was a volunteer during week two of this operation. I used up a whole week of my personal vacation in order to help with the cleanup. I have been involved in many of these garden reclamations in the past, so I and my partners have much experience. During week two of this operation we were allowed to do our job only two days. At times we had

to get up in the morning as early as 3:30 AM, and then had to sit and wait all day until we were finally sent home. I am very disappointed with the disrespect we experienced volunteers received from those top officials. However I have much respect for the fine team of US Park Police who were assigned to protect us. Unfortunately this was a great waste of taxpayers money since we and they were so under utilized.

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C Operation LOCCUST (NPS Digest)

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Marijuana Plantations Eradicated In Operation LOCCUST

For the past two weeks, the National Park Service has participated in intense field operations with 13 other agencies under Operation LOCCUST (Locating Organized Cannabis Cultivators Using Saturation Tactics). During this operation, nearly half of a million marijuana plants were eradicated from 82 identified grow complexes. Most of these complexes had several plots and camps for the cultivators.

“The cooperation of all of these agencies made Operation LOCCUST the huge success that it was,” said superintendent Craig Axtell. “The National Park Service alone would not have been able to attack this problem with the ferocity and resources that this cooperative effort was able to provide.”

Planning for Operation LOCCUST began almost eight months ago, with the National Park Service working closely with the Tulare County Sheriff’s Office (the host of the operation), US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, California National Guard, and many other federal and state agencies. Approximately 80% of the grow complexes were found on federal lands. During the two week field operation, the NPS provided almost 50 people and one K-9 unit. NPS rangers assisted with ten arrests and seized eight guns and twelve pounds of processed marijuana.

“It was a real honor to have the opportunity to work with sheriff Wittman and his staff,” said chief ranger JD Swed. “The professionalism and hard work that went into the planning and implementation of this operation was outstanding. Operation LOCCUST did send a clear message to drug trafficking organizations that Tulare county will not allow our public lands to be ruined or used to grow marijuana.”

Three grow complexes were found early in the season on Sequoia National Park lands, resulting in the seizure of 19,348 plants and seedlings, one arrest, and the identification of several persons of interest. All three grow complexes were cleaned and restored by the end of the operation. Sequoia/Kings Canyon has operated under Operation Weed Free for the past several years, with a mission of early interdiction and denying ground, thereby disrupting marijuana growing operations. The results of that effort are evident in the low number of marijuana complexes now being detected in the parks and the early stages of development of the plants that are being found.

Operation LOCCUST has a multi-tiered approach to marijuana prevention, through education, investigation and prosecution, eradication, and restoration of affected lands. During Operation LOCCUST, an awareness youth fun fair was held in Visalia, California, with information booths, K-9 demonstrations, and a Blackhawk helicopter. A media and VIP tour of a grow complex was conducted while agency staff and the High Sierra volunteer trail group cleaned up and restored the area. They removed a mile-and-a-half of irrigation tubing, along with over a ton of garbage and hazardous waste, including more than 200 pounds of fertilizer and two gallons of pesticides.

⁷\$Header: d:/Loccust/RCS/NPS.inc,v 1.1 2008-08-15 09:15:58-07 Hamilton Exp Hamilton \$

On August 5th, John P. Walters, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and United States attorney McGregor W. Scott came to Visalia for a press conference and tour of a grow site to learn more about this multiagency effort.

To date, there have been 42 arrests as part of Operation LOCCUST. Drugs and property seized as a result of this operation include 272 pounds of processed marijuana, eight ounces of cocaine, 42.5 ounces of methamphetamine, \$11,900 in cash, 32 weapons, and four vehicles.

About a third of the grow complexes that have been eradicated during this operation have been cleaned and restored. Personnel have also removed 19 dump truck loads of garbage (totaling more than 30,000 pounds) and 63 5,000-pound cargo net loads of waste (including more than 31 miles of irrigation pipe, 2,975 pounds of fertilizer, 22 pounds of pesticides, and 33.5 gallons of liquid chemicals). For each acre of marijuana plants, there is a negative environmental impact on approximately 15 acres of adjacent land.

Operation LOCCUST has a goal of reclaiming at least 40% of grow sites during the current operational phase, with additional reclamation scheduled for the winter months. Though eradication and restoration efforts will continue through out the season, August 9th was the last day a joint command post was maintained for Operation LOCCUST.

Contact Information Name: Alexandra Picavet, Public Affairs Specialist

D Raids Plague Drug Cartels in Nearby Mountain Forests

Media Awareness Project

URL: <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v08/n775/a06.html>
 Newshawk: <http://www.drugsense.org/donate.htm>
 Pubdate: Fri, 8 Aug 2008
 Source: Porterville Recorder (CA)
 Copyright: 2008 Freedom Communications Inc.
 Contact: <http://www.recorderonline.com/sections/editor-form/>
 Website: <http://www.recorderonline.com>
 Details: <http://www.mapinc.org/media/2887>
 Author: Jason Peterson, The Porterville Recorder
 Bookmark: <http://www.mapinc.org/find?115> (Marijuana - California)

Risk: Officers Face Danger Every Day.

SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN — A coordinated attack on illegal marijuana growers operating in nearby national forests is in full swing with today's large-scale raid on Sugarloaf Mountain.

And with nearly 90 grow sites taken out thus far in Tulare County, local, state and federal law enforcement officers are showing they mean business.

"We've been planning this for about three or four years, trying to get enough resources together at one time to really make an impact," Tulare County Sheriff Bill Wittman said, "not only to remove the marijuana plants, but to take out the infrastructure."

Decked with a bulletproof vest, Wittman was lowered into the site by helicopter to oversee progress there. The grow site is estimated at 30 acres containing between 15,000 to 20,000 cannabis plants with a potential value of \$80 million.

The site is a secluded patch of steep woodland located deep in the heart of Sequoia National Forest and requires a grueling, one-to two-hour hike to reach. As one approaches from ground level, the bright green rows of cannabis plants are unmistakable.

Today's scene had 15 to 20 men from a variety of state- and federal-funded organizations working to pull the plants and stack them in bundles to be airlifted out by helicopter. Each time the helicopters hovered close above ground, the rest of the crew hid behind trees and waited out the hurricane of dirt and debris.

A complex system of irrigation hoses and plant support lines held up by carving niches into the trees comprised four distinct plots of farm land. The support lines brace the plants skyward to absorb maximum sunlight and keep them from bending over. Officials estimate each plant possesses a low-end street value of \$4,000.

Lt. Mike Boudreaux, who leads Sheriff's Department's SWAT team, said the operation goes far beyond the value of the plants alone.

⁸\$Header: d:/Loccust/RCS/Map1.inc,v 1.4 2008-08-13 13:50:38-07 Hamilton Exp Hamilton \$

“One thing to pay attention to is not the plant count, but the damage to the land,” Boudreaux said. “They cut into trees, they damage the streams and they damage the landscape itself. This looks like some type of drug-trafficking organization and unfortunately, they knew what they were doing.”

Other agencies involved in Thursday’s raid include the California Department of Fish and Game and the California National Guard. Four other sites were also raided across the county today.

Mike Conely, a warden from the Department of Fish and Game where he’s labored for 15 years, checked whether pesticides and fertilizers polluted the streams.

“Our biggest priority is the impact on the environment and the poaching that goes on here,” Conely said. “The reclamation teams are removing the drip line and we’re taking the plastic out of the creeks.”

Sheriff’s Department Sgt. Chris Douglass said this is the middle phase of Operation LOC-CUST — Locating Organized Cannabis Cultivators Using Saturation Tactics — and represents the operation phase.

Phase One, initiated in November, included the planning, taking aerial photographs of grow sites and plotting the trails to enter. Phase Three, or the reclamation phase, has already begun as teams work to return raided grow sites back to their original states and will continue indefinitely.

“There are five teams in LOCCUST and four of them are dedicated to the eradication process,” Douglass said. “Only one team is devoted to the reclamation process. Phase Three also includes the prosecution phases and we still have prevention and education and awareness phases.”

Since Phase Two began, the operation has yielded some 420,000 plants in Tulare County, already well past the 330,884 gathered in all of 2007, which is more than any other state produced except Kentucky.

“It’s taking 14 various agencies — state, federal and local — to do this,” Wittman said. “We can’t do this by ourselves. You don’t know how dangerous it is for these guys. They do this every day; they hike in or they come in through the helicopters.”

Some 20 yards from the garden, agents found several tents surrounded by clutter of half-eaten food, garbage, pots and pans, and dried meat hanging on a clothesline draped by a mosquito net.

The inhabitants were not found, though it is possible the Sheriff’s Department discovered some form of identification left behind.

They declined to comment on the suspect’s identity.

Wittman said the dangers of raiding marijuana farms increases because most of the cultivators carry firearms.

“Out of the 36 arrests we made this last week, we’ve confiscated 27 firearms,” Wittman said. “One of our deputies had a shotgun pointed at him. He fired off three or four rounds and the suspect immediately dropped the gun and surrendered.”

Boudreaux said those in jail could face severe penalties if prosecuted. Should the cases reach federal courts, suspects can expect to face 10 to 20 years in prison for cultivating on national forest grounds.

Local charges can imprison suspects anywhere from three to seven years, depending on the suspect’s level of participation.

“Most (cultivators) are illegal aliens,” Boudreaux said, “but there are some people who have

recently become legal residents in California, so it's a combination of both."

By Wednesday, LOCCUST had laid hold of plants worth more than \$1.4 billion, authorities report. Tulare County typically ranks among the top five counties in California and is currently No. 2 behind Lake County for most plants seized.

"You could take California's top three or four staples combined and they don't exceed marijuana's production," California National Guard officer Tim Kelley said.

Kelley works for the Counter-drug Task Force.

Wittman said he hopes this operation will stymie the state's recent infusion of drug cartels and profiteers, though he admits it may never end.

"They'll come back," Wittman said. "And we'll come back, too. We'll develop all the resources we can to come back. We cannot give up one acre of our parks, so we're gonna fight this thing."

MAP posted-by: Richard Lake

E Marijuana Sweep Nets Big Payoff

Media Awareness Project

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Marijuana Sweep Nets Big payoff

Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies say they have seized more than 340,000 marijuana plants with an estimated street value of \$1.4 billion and arrested 36 suspects in a sweeping crackdown on marijuana cultivation on public land in eastern Tulare County over the last week.

The joint operation involving 14 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, which started July 27 and will continue through Aug. 9, brought President Bush's drug czar, John Walters, to a press conference at the National Guard Armory in Visalia yesterday, where officials announced the program.

Called Operation LOCCUST, for Locating Organized Cannabis Cultivators Using Saturation Tactics, the foot- and air-based raids focused on 83 locations where marijuana was being grown on federal and state land in eastern Tulare County.

Some of the land was in the Sequoia National Forest and in Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks.

"I want to congratulate those here who've made these arrests possible," Walters, director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, said to an audience of about 70 law enforcement, state and local officials.

Walters spent Tuesday morning in a Blackhawk helicopter touring several marijuana growing locations. The tour stopped by Osa Creek in the Sequoia National Forest, where officials said they destroyed up to 12,000 plants Monday evening.

Among those accompanying Walters was Tulare County Supervisor Allen Ishida, who has pushed for federal and state aid for drug policing on public lands.

Up to 80 percent of the marijuana grown in the United States is grown on public lands, much of it controlled by Mexican cartels, Walters said. The raids, he said, were meant as a message to those drug traffickers:

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“Get out,” he said. “You’re not going to turn our communities and our national treasures into poison.”

Multi-Agency Operation

The joint operation involves a range of federal, state and local agencies, including the U.S. Attorney’s Office, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, the California Highway Patrol and the Tulare County Sheriff’s Department.

The agencies began planning last November and started surveillance flights by the California Air National Guard in January, Tulare County Sheriff Bill Wittman said.

The operation is a pilot program that began last year in Shasta County, one of the dozen of inland California counties where large-scale marijuana cultivation on public lands is a growing problem, said U.S. Attorney McGregor Scott.

Officials said they were especially concerned about how the presence of marijuana growing areas affects public and law enforcement safety, as well as their environmental effect because poaching, clear-cutting and toxic chemicals are often involved.

Last year, Tulare County spent \$350,000 and was forced to assign much of its gang task force to public lands drug policing during the summer, county officials said.

The joint operation, however, helped the county quickly equal its 2007 record-setting marijuana busts and dismantle some of the infrastructure — irrigation hoses, stream diversions, and tents and cabins — that growers erect, officials said.

“We’ve never had the resources available to do that,” Wittman said, adding that the total cost of the program will be shared among the participating agencies and has yet to be determined.

MAP posted-by: Richard Lake