

National forests fall prey to major marijuana growers

SAN BERNARDINO NATIONAL FOREST, Calif. — They were spotted from the air, as conspicuous as sharks in a school of guppies: Three plots of land, seemingly stripped of the towering oaks and manzanitas that surround this patch of Southern California forest.

These were not natural formations. They were entirely man-made.

A week after the August sighting, a helicopter returned with two dozen Forest Service agents and sheriff's deputies. They cleared a landing pad and cut a trail into the forest, coming first to a makeshift reservoir. Six hoses, filtering water from a creek, ran in one end; several more snaked back out the other.

Moving on, the agents reached the first clearing. They'd been right.

In place of the trees this forest is meant to protect stood a grove of emerald stalks, six to 15 feet tall. They were in full bloom.

On two acres of prime forest land, about a half-hour from the city of San Bernardino and 1 1/2 hours from Los Angeles, these agents had discovered the latest battleground in the war on drugs: a 23,000-plant marijuana plantation.

As money and manpower continue to flow to the southwest border to stop illegal drugs coming into this country, traffickers are producing vast quantities of marijuana right here in the United States, on land owned by the federal government.

The reasons are obvious: the land is fertile, remote and free. There's no risk of forfeiture, plantations are difficult to trace, and growers have land agents outmanned, outfitted and outgunned.

"We spend a lot of time and energy stopping stuff from coming into this country, but we don't really pay much attention to our own back yard," said Dan Bauer, the Forest Service's drug program coordinator.

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates that more than half of the marijuana consumed in the United States is produced domestically. Much of that is grown on public lands, primarily the country's 155 national forests.

Pesticides used by the illegal growers poison wildlife and waterways, although the crop's danger is not just environmental. Park visitors run the risk of tripping booby traps or encountering armed gangs. After stumbling upon a marijuana farm, some visitors have been run off at gunpoint, Bauer said, adding that Forest Service agents have sometimes exchanged gunfire with growers.

The public's perception of the drug war is a border agent pulling bundles of narcotics from the bed of a truck, Bauer said. "They very rarely think of the poor forest agent crawling through the bush..."

In 1999, 452,330 marijuana plants were removed from national forest land, mostly in California and Kentucky. Each plant estimated to produce at least 2.2 pounds of pot, that's 995,126 pounds of marijuana, with an estimated street value of about \$700 million.

The U.S. Customs Service seized 989,369 pounds of marijuana along the Southwest border in fiscal year 1999, while the Border Patrol confiscated just under 1.2 million pounds over his trial in 1998.

The difference: Customs has 2,900 inspectors and agents manning Southwest ports of entry; the Border Patrol has 7,761 agents patrolling between those ports.

There are just 588 Forest Service agents and officers assigned to 192 million acres of national forests, a decline from 625 officers in 1996. That's nearly 330,000 acres per officer, and only one of them is dedicated full time to drug enforcement.

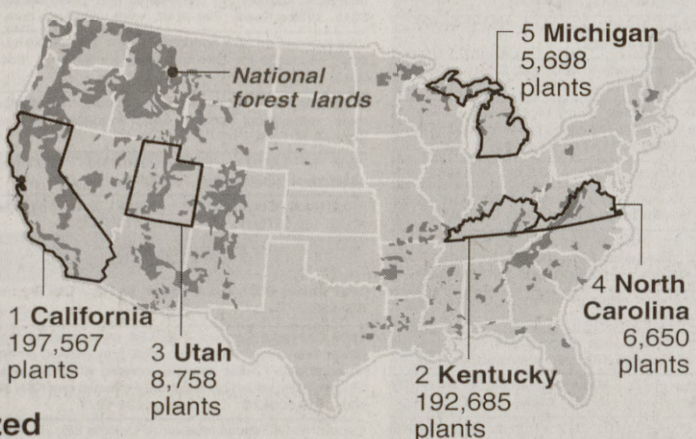
"We don't know how much is growing out there," Bauer said. "There are places where we're probably getting less than 10 percent. I doubt we're getting much over 10 percent in most of our areas."

Homegrown

An estimated half of the marijuana consumed in the United States is grown domestically. Marijuana growers often exploit the abundance of remote national forest lands to develop large plantations.

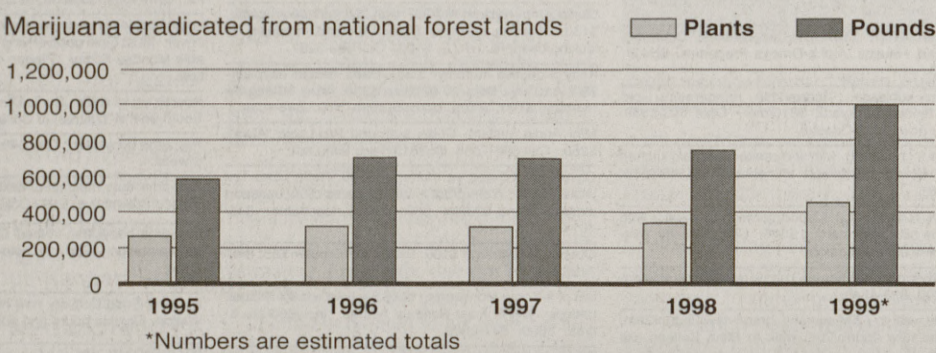
Top offenders

Here is a look at the top five states for seizures of marijuana cultivated on national forest lands.



Marijuana seized

Despite a decline in the number of Forest Service agents, the amounts of marijuana seized on national forest lands has increased.



Source: U.S. Forest Service

Marijuana is the most popular illegal drug in the United States, with about 11 million users, including 8.3 percent of teens, according to government statistics.

One nationwide program is dedicated to the problem of U.S.-produced marijuana — the Drug Enforcement Administration's Domestic Cannabis Eradication and Suppression Program. It receives 1 percent of the agency's \$1.4 billion budget. In 1998 the DEA reported seizing 2.5 million U.S.-produced marijuana plants, including 232,000 indoor plants. Those seizures were done in coordination with state and local agencies; the DEA doesn't track seizures done by public land agencies.

"Issues dealing with cocaine and heroin and drugs that people are dying from tend to have a higher priority as far as enforcement goes," DEA spokesman Terry Parham said.

Public lands have long been targeted by marijuana producers, but investigators trace a rise in production to the 1980s, when the government enacted more stringent asset forfeiture laws.

Before that, "if you were caught growing pot on your own property, you wouldn't lose your property," Bauer said. "People could grow corn rows of marijuana literally in corn fields."

In the late '80s and early '90s, the profile of a typical grower was a "white, hippie-type" running 100- to 1,000-plant farms, agents said. These days the mom-and-pop

operations are far outnumbered by major pot plantations, ranging in size from 1,000 to 10,000 plants or more.

In the Southeast, old moonshining families now run marijuana farms. But that's only part of the problem in places like Kentucky's Daniel Boone National Forest, which consistently ranks first among national forests in marijuana seizures.

"It's a large unorganized coalition of people that live very close to national forest lands who are generally very close to the poverty level and looking for any way to try to make a dollar," said Jack Gregory, special agent in charge of the Forest Service's Southern region.

In the Southwest, Bauer said, most pot operations are run by Mexican drug organizations that either ship crews across the border or hire illegal immigrants to do the work.

"Just the cost of doing business up here makes it great," said Mike Wirz, a narcotics detective with the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department who works with the Forest Service to investigate marijuana groves on federal property. "They don't pay for the land, they don't pay for the water and they pay very little for their overhead because they're using illegal workers."

Wirz also noted that by growing their product in the United States, Mexican cartels eliminate the extra cost and risk of paying a courier to bring drugs into the country.

Science in Brief

Marrow cells may help find cancer

Looking for malignant cells lurking in the bone marrow of women getting breast cancer surgery may help doctors better predict patients' chances of survival, researchers say.

Currently, doctors assess a patient's odds by two means: gauging the size of the tumor, and removing and examining some of the lymph nodes in the armpit for signs the cancer has spread.

A new study conducted in Germany raises the possibility that the bone marrow is an even better predictor of the chances of a relapse or a cure.

Used together, the three methods could help doctors decide with more precision which patients should get aggressive chemotherapy after surgery, researchers say.

"This is the second large study to suggest that bone marrow is an important predictor," said Dr. Michael P. Osborne, director of the Strang-Cornell Breast Center in New York and the first researcher credited with the discovery. "It may have significant potential to improve breast cancer treatment."

The study was reported in Thursday's issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Malaria mutations cause resistance

A mutation-prone gene in the malaria parasite apparently plays a key role in the deadly organism's growing resistance to drugs, scientists say.

The findings could help researchers design new drugs to combat the mosquito-borne parasite, which kills more than a million people a year.

Scientists from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne and Australian National University in Canberra reported their findings in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*.

The researchers studied *Plasmodium falciparum*, malaria's deadliest strain, and found that the mutated gene prevents anti-malarial drugs from accumulating within the parasite.

Somehow, the mutations allow the parasite to either block drugs from entering or quickly pump them out, said Alan F. Cowman, chief of the division of infection and immunity at the Hall Institute.

Scientists find life exists on small land

Scientists who inventoried Earth's shrinking wilds have reached an astonishing conclusion: More than a third of the planet's plant and animal species exist exclusively on a scant 1.4 percent of its land surface.

The researchers said the findings show that saving a large share of the world's species from extinction isn't an overwhelming task.

They believe conservationists just need to focus on safeguarding 25 species-rich "hotspots" — mostly tropical rain forests.

"The whole point of this is that for a few hundred million dollars a year, focused on these hotspots, we can go a long way toward guaranteeing maintenance of the full range of diversity of life on Earth," said Russell Mittermeier, president of Conservation International, and one of the study's authors.

The British-American team led by Norman Myers of Oxford University relied on previous research to tally the numbers of land species that inhabit Earth's remaining pristine forests, grasslands and other habitats. Fish and insects were excluded. Because some of the tropical areas remain unexplored, the researchers had to rely on experts' best estimates.

The findings appear in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*. Mittermeier said some of the researchers were surprised by the riot of life they found occupying such a small portion of land.

The team identified 25 "hotspots" covering a total of 810,000 square miles.

Estrogen does not help Alzheimer's

CHICAGO (AP) — A year of taking estrogen did nothing to slow the progression of Alzheimer's or improve mental function in 120 older women with mild to moderate forms of the disease, researchers reported today.

Research has suggested that women who take estrogen are less likely to develop Alzheimer's. But the study published in today's *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that once the mind-robbing disease sets in, the female hormone offers no benefit.

"Overall, the results of this study do not support the role of estrogen in the treatment" of Alzheimer's, wrote researchers led by neuroscientist Ruth Mulnard of the University of California at Irvine.

Alzheimer's affects more than 4 million Americans, stealing their memories and ability to care for themselves. About twice as many women as men have the incurable disease, in part because they tend to live longer.

Its causes are unknown, but suggestions that the decline in estrogen levels in women at menopause might somehow make them more vulnerable to the disease have prompted interest in the hormone as a possible treatment.

Thursday, February 24, 2000

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