

Big marijuana grows moving into foothills, bringing environmental damage

By HEATHER HACKING-Staff Writer Oroville Mercury Register

Posted:

oroillemr.com

The days of the happy hippie growing marijuana for himself and a few friends has been replaced by a "free-for-all," wildlife managers said.

Motivated by profit, people from other states are moving to Northern California, where there are wooded areas, not enough law enforcement and pot-friendly communities.

While one pot garden isn't a problem, having many grows in one area adds up, wildlife watchers said.

The public has heard horror stories from the worst scenarios — where people hike into the back woods, haul backpacks filled with chemicals, then hope there isn't a raid before harvest. Often, Mexican nationals are arrested.

Yet, the trend has been for marijuana growers to move into better growing areas, particularly elevations of 500-1,500 feet, closer to roads and communities. Some might even look like legal grows, and have Proposition 215 signs posted, but too many plants.

Brad Henderson, an environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, has studied Google Earth satellite images to spot marijuana grows.

"If you look at aerial photographs and see 50 grows in a watershed," it's an environmental problem, Henderson said.

Fifty grows isn't an exaggeration, he noted.

Landowners duped, more growers migrate

In areas where marijuana growing looks hospitable, people have been known to come in and lease or pay a low downpayment for purchase of a property, then make no other payments, said Clint Snyder, assistant executive officer of the Central Valley Regional Water Quality board.

By the time the landowner checks in, the pot has been grown and the people have left a mess behind.

This becomes a cleanup nightmare for the property owner.

Other times, the property owner endorses the grow, or has been told it will be an organic grow, said DeWayne Little, who works in wildlife protection for California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The problem has increased in recent years as California has become a popular destination for people who want to grow, but can't in their home state. Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said Northern California is being "invaded" by people from Texas, Arizona and Colorado.

The landowner might even think it's a legitimate grow for a marijuana cooperative, he said.

Specific areas mentioned included Feather Falls, Cohasset, Concow, and throughout Shasta and Tehama counties.

Drug agencies go after the big grows, but there's plenty of "wiggle room" for other growers to prosper, the men said.

People who are willing to take a chance hope to grow a big profit and then move on, the sources agreed.

"It's gotten so bad that cartels have moved into the outskirts of communities, and out of the national forest. They're buying, leasing or renting property under the guise of 215 grows," Little continued.

Fertilizers in forest lands

People choose sites where trees hide the area.

"Forest soil is sterile and species are adapted to a relatively nutrient-deficient environment," Little said.

Growers often create three-foot-diameter pots with imported soil. Nutrients wash away, and more are added.

Cannabis has nutrient needs similar to corn, Henderson said, and you wouldn't grow corn on forest soil. Growers add even more fertilizer because they want the biggest boost in a single season, he continued.

Fertilizers flow into creeks and feed algae.

In the late summer and fall, the algae dies. When the plants decompose, oxygen is drawn from the water, and fish die, Little said.

Someone growing a garden or landscaping for a home wouldn't add massive fertilizers, the sources added.

Water issues

Marijuana is a thirsty plant and may need up to 10 gallons a day per plant in hot weather, Henderson said.

If one grower has 100 plants, the water needs add up. If there are dozens of large grows in the area, the water runs out.

Henderson has witnessed "unbelievably clever" systems for drawing water from creeks.

Fish, frogs, insects and other species need clean, cool water. Lower water flow raises the temperatures, and fish disease spreads rapidly.

The same goes for insects, which are the food for fish.

Henderson said property owners have seen creeks run dry where there has been continuous water for decades.

By the time the problem is tracked down, the marijuana grower might be gone, the men said.

When there isn't enough water, it's not uncommon for people to truck in water. Little said people will go to a creek or river and fill up 1,000-2,000 gallon tanks. He's even seen water-tender trucks (used by firefighters and construction crews) heading up into the hills in Shasta County.

District Attorney Ramsey said there is no way of knowing how many wells have been drilled specifically for marijuana grows, but a lot of new wells have been drilled.

Soil movement/erosion

Then there is flat-out illegal movement of soil. Wooded areas are typically sloped, and often leveled for pot gardens.

When a house is built, there are rules and permits for minimizing runoff, explained Snyder, of the state Regional Water Quality board.

After the marijuana is harvested, the rains come and silt in water smothers fish and fish eggs, biologist Henderson said.

Erosion also distributes fertilizer and chemicals throughout the watershed. These effects are diluted, but can be cumulative.

Poisons

Marijuana is lucrative and growers use potent pesticides, said Henderson, continuing with his list of environmental hazards.

In remote areas, growers put out things to directly kill grazing animals and bears, such as bait that smells like bacon, he noted.

Even in semi-urban areas, poisons are used to protect plants. When rodents die, they can be eaten by predators including birds and mammals. Then there are miticides and other insect controls, which add up when there are a lot of plants to protect.

General mess

Snyder, of the state Regional Water Quality board, said the very remote grows usually result in a pile of trash left behind — car batteries, fecal matter, leftover chemicals.

To get to these areas and do cleanup is more than agencies can afford. Agencies already know many areas that haven't been cleaned up. But even more grow sites are unknown, and canisters of chemicals are slowly degrading.

"I'm not trying to overstate this, but we don't have a clue" how much damage is being caused, Little said.

"We will be paying for these grows for years to come."

Reach Heather Hacking at 896-7758, hhacking@chicoer.com, or on Twitter @HeatherHacking.