

STATEMENT BY KAREN TAYLOR-GOODRICH, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR VISITOR AND RESOURCE PROTECTION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEES ON NATIONAL PARKS REGARDING NATIONAL PARK SERVICE EFFORTS TO COMBAT THE GROWTH OF ILLEGAL DRUG FARMS IN PARKS.

November 17, 2005

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the efforts being made by the National Park Service to protect our visitors and resources from marijuana cultivation operations on national park lands.

We are always greatly concerned at the discovery of drug activity in the national parks. National Park Service (NPS) practices and policies are dedicated to preserving cultural and natural resources while providing a safe, clean, and secure environment for its visitors and workforce. Illegal activity, especially one that fosters a component of violence, threatens the mission of the NPS and the haven of peace and serenity that our public seeks when they visit our parks. Many of our parks, particularly those in California and along the southern border, experience illegal drug and smuggling activities such as the use of abandoned sites for methamphetamine labs, the creation of mobile methamphetamine labs in old trucks, and the establishment of illegal drug farms, the subject of this hearing. These activities threaten our employees, visitors, and our mission of protecting some of the nation's most prized natural and cultural resources. There is some history associated with this issue, and I feel it may be illustrative for me to provide some background on how we have successfully dealt with this problem in the past.

In the 1980s, marijuana gardens proliferated at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (NP). The terrain and the ideal weather conditions were conducive for the growth of high yield marijuana. To most of the visiting public, the Hawaiian Islands represent peace and tranquility in a lush tropical setting. Marijuana growers in Hawaii Volcanoes NP protected their illegal crops with attack dogs and threats of violence to those who stumbled upon their sites. The NPS eradicated the illegal crops, or "gardens", by a coordinated and assertive approach of consistent surveillance, teamwork, and arrests, coupled by collaboration with the U.S. Attorney who always prosecuted the cases to the fullest extent of the law.

The key to this effective and successful campaign was sufficient personnel and consistency. It meant staking out every marijuana patch and arresting growers. Our goal was to eliminate the cultivation of an illegal drug in the park. It is the same goal we have established for each of the threatened national parks within the contiguous 48 states. An important lesson learned from the Hawaii Volcanoes experience is to recognize that the drug cultivation in our parks is orchestrated by cartels and requires a coordinated Federal, state, and local response. In short, this is not an issue that is restricted to national parks but transcends across all public lands, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service), and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The drug cartels are very secretive, well-equipped, highly organized, and well-supplied. Drug cartels arm their growers with guns and knives. They provide booby traps such as bear traps, which can seriously injure or kill a human, and teach the gardeners how to set them. We have found a number of weapons, including air rifles, .22 caliber long guns, 12 gauge shotguns, 9 mm and 40 caliber hand guns, assault rifles, knives, and machetes. They hire people who cannot, or pretend not to, speak English, and locate them in very hard-to-get-to-places where few others go. They expect them to live in squalid conditions for months at a time, tending a multi-million-dollar crop. The gardeners appear to be willing to live a squatter's life with interesting and seemingly conflicting needs. Oddly, these remote and difficult-to-find locations often contain religious icons or shrines matched with AK-47s, bowie knives, and pornographic magazines.

Though the threat to visitors and employees remains our highest concern, the devastating effect to the resources, including the wildlife, of the parks cannot be forgotten. Tons of trash – in open as well as buried pits – is hauled out by park rangers after a location is found. Human waste, food garbage, carcasses of poached animals, shovels, buckets, and miles and miles of irrigation hoses are found along with the ubiquitous blue tarps and other debris.

These criminals are cutting trees, diverting streams, creating crude dams, and contaminating the soil. Major irrigation systems can carry water from up to a mile away. Some are gravity fed. Some have timers. Some are on drip systems. Huge quantities of chemicals such as ammonia nitrate, sevin, malathion, diazinon, dcon, strychnine, and detergents are found in the camps.

In 2002, a particularly unlucky park visitor stumbled upon one of the drug camps in a California park. This visitor was threatened by the grower with keeping the location secret. It is fortunate that the visitor was released unharmed by the grower even though he had seen the heavily fortified grounds. The next visitor may not be so lucky. It was this incident that led to concerted efforts to begin eradication during the summer of 2003.

Park rangers have increasingly become concerned that some of the illegal encampments have been only a few feet from visitor hiking trails. In many of these locations the brush is so dense that no one spotted the garden or blue tarps in the camps. The casual visitor usually stays on the trails as dense vines of poison oak carpet the hillsides and banks leading into these illegal sites.

In 2002 at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, park rangers discovered marijuana gardens when they became suspicious of a massive tadpole die-off. Park rangers tracked up through a canyon and water source to the remains of a small dam that growers had created to hold water with a jerry-rigged open can of fertilizer suspended in it. A flash flood wiped out the dam and washed intense concentrations of fertilizer downstream, poisoning the fry. From this discovery, the park rangers followed nearly vertical trails, often on their stomachs and in dense rattlesnake country, to locate gardens perched on the edges of cliffs. Growers had seriously damaged the resource by scraping the terrain nearly flat and disguising many of the locales from both ground and air surveillance.

The problems we are discovering are emblematic of how the skills and abilities of professional law enforcement park rangers are being tested every day on remote NPS lands that are conducive to illegal cultivation. It also exemplifies our struggle to protect the cultural and natural resources while providing the visiting public a safe, clean, and secure opportunity to experience their parks.

The NPS is actively engaged with the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the National Marijuana Initiative (NMI), the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) and the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP). While this is an issue in national park areas around the country, our information suggests that the most significant problem appears to be in California. The NPS also has been working on marijuana eradication with many agencies, including the California Department of Justice, the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, the California National Guard, the Forest Service, the BLM, the United States Attorney's Office as well as multiple county sheriffs departments. An important aspect of these partnerships is the overall commitment of purpose and the understanding that to be successful it is essential to work closely together. This is indeed happening.

Despite our successes, we are dealing with a truly significant and extensive problem. In California, our data indicates that Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, Whiskeytown NRA, Santa Monica Mountains NRA, Golden Gate NRA, and Point Reyes National Seashore all have drug trafficking organization activities within and around their boundaries. In 2004, approximately one million marijuana plants were eradicated within the state of California; of that amount, approximately 60 thousand plants were from park lands. While we are attempting to aggressively quantify the overall problem, how much marijuana is being cultivated and the extent to which these organizations operate on park lands is not fully known. Our intelligence indicates that most of these cultivation operations were conducted by a small number of Mexican national organizations.

We continue to be committed to provide adequate financial and operational resources to combat this disturbing trend. For example in Fiscal Year 2006, Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park received an increase of \$428,000 to assist in combating marijuana cultivation in the park. We are deeply concerned for the safety of NPS employees who must fight this war on drugs and for those visitors who seek to enjoy the beauty and serenity of the backcountry. The NPS has both the responsibility to ensure that its 387 units are well-managed for this and future generations. We must continue to work collaboratively with other law enforcement agencies to stop this illegal activity now for the safety of our visitors and our staff and for the protection of our priceless resources.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other members may have.