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Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks
United States House of Representatives

Oversight hearing on National Park Service efforts to combat the growth of illegal drugs farms in parks

November 17, 2005

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Allen Ishida, a member of the Tulare County Board of Supervisors. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the growing problem of illegal drug activity on our public lands.

Tulare County is centrally located within the heart of the San Joaquin Valley and covers an area of 4,863 square miles. The eastern half of the County is comprised primarily of public lands within the Sequoia National Park, National Forest, and the Mineral King, Golden Trout, and Domelands Wilderness areas. Tulare County is the gateway to Sequoia National Park. 48% of Tulare County is federally-owned land.

As a local elected official, I am here to testify to the local impacts of drug trafficking on our public lands. While ostensibly a federal issue, we in Tulare County have been active partners with federal and state agencies on eradication efforts.

Marijuana production within Sequoia National Park has risen dramatically in recent years. In Tulare County, the problem has grown to such an extent that our law enforcement is being forced to divert essential resources from other crime-fighting activities to respond to the problem.

Since the 1990's Tulare County has experienced a rapid growth in drug trafficking organizations using our local area to cultivate, process, and transport illegal marijuana.

In 2004, Tulare County Sheriff's Department located and eradicated 161,624 live marijuana plants from private and public lands – 87% of that total from federal lands.

In 2004, California led the nation in illegal marijuana production. Tulare County led California in eradication of illegal marijuana.

The largest single eradicated garden in California was located in Tulare County (70,000 + plants).

To appreciate the magnitude of the illegal drug production taking place, consider that for 2004 the total wholesale value of seized plants was \$646 million and had a total retail value of more than \$1.9 billion. These numbers are staggering in comparison to the resources being allocated for eradication.

So far this year, the Tulare County Sheriff's Department has removed 157,529 plants from both public and private lands and made 28 arrests. From October, 2004 to October of this year, it devoted 5,270 total manpower hours – including straight time and overtime.

As these numbers show, the problem is pervasive and one that demands greater resources.

The impacts of escalating drug activity are not just limited to law enforcement. Fire suppression is jeopardized when the safety of firefighters cannot be guaranteed amid the threat of armed drug dealers. Botanists and wildlife experts are unable to provide restoration or conduct needed surveys of trees and game. The Forest Service's ability to manage watersheds is undermined. All face the danger posed by drug cartels that have infiltrated our national parks and whose criminal operations are not only destroying the ecosystem but also risking the safety of our citizens.

Our national parks are public lands. They must be made safe again for the public. To that end, we have put forth a proposal to pool resources and expertise to more effectively combat drug trafficking – primarily marijuana harvesting.

This summer, we brought together federal, state, and local agencies to brainstorm the problem. Participants included the National Park, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, California Department of Justice, California Highway Patrol, our Sheriff and Our District Attorney. From that discussion we have developed a comprehensive plan to strengthen eradication efforts: the Tulare County Multi-Jurisdictional Marijuana Investigation Team.

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors has endorsed this proposal, and we have received encouragement from Congressman Nunes and the offices of Senators Feinstein and Boxer. We are seeking state and federal funding to create this full time multi-agency team consisting of local, state, and federal personnel to investigate all aspects of criminal activity involving illegal marijuana.

The overall size and scope of the investigation team will depend upon funding levels received. Ideally, the optimal team size would consist of (7) seven Deputy Sheriff's, (1) Sheriff Sergeant, (1) Deputy District Attorney, (1) California Highway Patrol Officer, (1) State Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement (BNE) officer, (1) Federal Forest Service Agent, and (1) Federal Park Agent.

Justification for our proposal is based upon these facts:

Tulare County continues to see a steady increase in the amount of marijuana cultivation on public and private land.

Illegal marijuana activities cross all local, state, and federal jurisdictional boundaries.

Drug trafficking organizations responsible for the vast majority of cultivated marijuana continue to evolve and become more organized and efficient. Our chief producer is a major Mexican drug cartel.

Multi-Jurisdictional models have proven successful in the past.

Illegal marijuana cultivation presents a clear danger to our residents and visitors. The techniques used to grow the illegal crop negatively impacts the environment including animals, fauna, and water.

Adequate funding would allow our Sheriff's Department to fund a full-time team dedicated to investigating all aspects of illegal marijuana activities.

Funding would allow all involved agencies to work under one roof facilitating a better flow of information and coordination of resources.

Funding that would eliminate illegal marijuana cultivation in Tulare County, disrupt all activities associated with drug trafficking organizations, and identify and arrest those responsible for illegal activities.

Funding that would allow Tulare County to organize and operate a model program that could be adopted and utilized throughout the United States.

We have a track record of success. For more than a decade, Tulare County has experienced a rapid growth in drug traffickers using our local area to either grow or manufacture a variety of illegal substances. Fortunately, local law enforcement and government officials were able to recognize the trend regarding the local manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine along with its potential to devastate our resident's quality of life.

It was through a joint effort that local officials were able to educate and illustrate to state and federal officials the serious threat these illegal operations posed to our residents. As a result of our efforts, Tulare County received federal recognition as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), which allowed additional funds to combat the problems associated with the manufacture of methamphetamine.

Through additional state funding the Tulare County Sheriff's Department developed the Clandestine Lab Enforcement Unit (CLEU). Utilizing a team approach encompassing techniques of intelligence gathering, surveillance, confidential informants, and intelligence sharing with other units and agencies, the CLEU team was able to significantly reduce clandestine lab operations in Tulare County.

The same approach can and should be used to purge the marijuana infestation from our national parks. But it will take the leadership of Congress and our federal agencies to do so.

We at the local level cannot do it alone. In Tulare County, we are fighting a two-front war against drugs on our public lands and gangs in our neighborhoods. We cannot continue to divert resources from our crime-fighting on the Valley floor without a serious and sustained commitment from our federal and state leaders that the war on drugs is real.

Thank you.

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