

California hunters at risk from illegal pot growers, law enforcers say

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Hunters beware: California's public lands are threatened by more and more illegal marijuana growing operations, with armed crews toting powerful weaponry.

That message Sunday during the 24th International Sportsmen's Exposition at Cal Expo came from a law enforcement panel that included state game wardens, a wildlife advocate and a Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement task force commander.

The Mexican drug networks have turned largely to California and its Mediterranean climate for their operations that now supply much of the country with the weed, the panelists said.

As a result, those operations are an increasing threat to outdoor enthusiasts, sportsmen and women and any other passers-by who might not recognize the danger signals of trash, irrigation equipment and stream diversions, they said.

In addition, the illicit growers use fertilizers for plant growth and chemicals to kill any animals, large or small, that typically inhabit the area. Runoff, in turn, pollutes nearby streams and can affect sources of downstream drinking water.

Nancy Foley, chief of the Law Enforcement Division for the state Department of Fish and Game, called illegal marijuana cultivation "the No. 1 destroyer of habitat in the United States."

State Fish and Game Warden Lt. John Nores Jr., co-author of a new book, "War in the Woods – Combating the Marijuana Cartels on America's Public Lands," agreed with that sentiment and said the problems go well beyond public safety.

"We are talking about the degradation of California resources in the most pristine areas in a most egregious fashion," Nores said.

Nores, based in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties, was joined by the book's co-author and panel moderator James Swan, along with other law enforcement officers and a wildlife advocate.

Nores is a featured warden on the new National Geographic Channel reality show, "Wild Justice." Swan is a co-executive producer.

Swan said that marijuana plant confiscations from illegal growing operations nearly trebled in a three-year period between 2006 and 2009.

The Bee reported in 2009 that marijuana operations that year occurred in 40 of the state's 58 counties and exceeded the state of Washington's contraband eightfold.

That year, the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, a California task force of nine state and

federal agencies, reported a 1.1 million-plant increase over 2008.

"It gets worse every year," said Richard Camps, task force commander for the state attorney general's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement.

More than 50 people attended the session. When asked if they were concerned about stumbling onto an illegal marijuana farm, a majority of hunters raised their hands.

The advice: Use a Global Positioning System device to note the location, withdraw from the area avoiding confrontation if possible, and then call and report the find to local law enforcement agencies in the area.

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