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Deep-forest marijuana farms can damage ecosystem after raids, officials say

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The Press-Enterprise

Officials have dismantled more than 30 marijuana farms growing in the San Bernardino National Forest this year, but scientists say the effects on the forest's delicate ecosystem could last for years.

Scientists who study forests say it can take years for an area formerly inhabited by a marijuana farm to return to its natural state, if it ever will.

But agents don't have the time or money to remove all the debris connected with marijuana farms. Helicopters often are used to haul the marijuana and other items out of the forest because these areas are not easily accessible by trails.

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Denese D. Stokes / U.S. Forest Service

This debris-strewn scene was in the San Bernardino National Forest last year after a marijuana-growing operation was busted.

"We try to clean up as much as we possibly can when we do the eradication but helicopter time is incredibly expensive," said Forest Service special agent Denese Stokes. "There are always things that we cannot get out."

Special agents are on track this year to bust more illegal marijuana growing operations in California than they did last year, said U.S. Forest Service spokesman John Heil.

He said 1.2 million marijuana plants were pulled from U.S. Forest Service land in 2006 in California, 1.7 million in 2007 and 1.3 million so far this year.

Those plants were cleared from more than 7,400 acres in the state since the beginning of the year.

In the San Bernardino National Forest, more than 200,000 marijuana plants were removed from 33 sites from August to mid-September, said John Miller, forest spokesman.

Pulling evidence, such as the marijuana, and removing rodent-killing chemicals, fertilizers and any other dangerous chemicals is the priority, Stokes said, but watering pipes, tents and associated garbage often are left behind.

Growers use chemicals to kill animals because they might damage the marijuana, Stokes said.

Officers cannot always remove all the chemicals and fertilizers, said Patrick Foy, a warden with the state Department of Fish and Game.

Stokes said that once agents are through with all the clearing they can do from the initial raid, the Forest Service makes no other efforts to clean up the remaining garbage.

No Extensive Studies

Southern California is home to some of the most diverse plant and wildlife in the world -- and many rare species that are already battered by human encroachment and pollution, said Thomas Scott, a University of California professor. He teaches in Riverside and studies how humans affect natural habitats.

The San Bernardino National Forest is home to more than 150 protected animal and plant species, according to the Forest Service's Web site.

The land might never recover if fertilizers and other chemicals are added, Scott said.

"It's not something that will cleanse itself or heal itself quickly."

Forest ecologist Malcolm North, a UC Davis professor who does research for the Forest Service, said areas stripped of natural vegetation become vulnerable to exotic plants that can take over and may not be hospitable to other plant and wildlife.

Marijuana farms also cause damage by siphoning water from streams, said Taylor McKinnon, public lands program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit organization that studies and helps preserve natural areas.

"The West doesn't have any water to spare, particularly in these remote wildlands."

Scott, North and McKinnon said no one has studied extensively how marijuana farms damage the forest.

"Only in the last five or 10 years has it become widespread enough of a problem for it to warrant examination," North said.

McKinnon and North said the long-term effects are unknown but could be significant.

"The cumulative impact of this happening across the West can add up," McKinnon said.

Volunteers Needed

U.S. Forest Service officials hope a nonprofit organization will help clean up these sites as volunteers from the High Sierra Volunteer Trail Crew have in Northern and Central California.

Shane Krogen, executive director of the High Sierra Volunteer Trail Crew, and his volunteers remove tons of garbage, chemicals and irrigation lines left behind from marijuana-farm busts, but they can only get to a small number of sites.

Finding other volunteer crews willing and able to do the work is difficult. Cleanup crews must be accompanied by law enforcement for their safety and must get legal clearance. None are working in the San Bernardino National

Forest.

Krogen said it was difficult for his crew to wade through the bureaucracy before they could start the cleanup missions.

"We had to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but we were able to do it," Krogen said.

He said he believes it is crucial for volunteer teams to work these sites because policing agencies aren't doing it.

"Their mission is to cut plants. They do not do restoration, period," Krogen said.

He estimates there are thousands of sites statewide that have not been cleaned up.

"There is just so much out there that it is beyond belief."

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