

FLYING HIGH

California narcotics agents airlift pot plants out of a secret garden in Mendocino County.



The Mexican cartels have made marijuana a cash crop worth billions of dollars by infiltrating America's national forests and turning them into vast pot plantations. Can anyone halt the harvest? By James Verini

A BUDDING INVASION



trees, glistening lakes, and snowy mountaintops. It is the kind of place where a visitor resolves to write a check to

the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in Northern California covers over two million acres, stretching roughly from the former lumber town of Redding north to near the Oregon border, and from close to the Pacific Ocean east toward Nevada. Like most of the public land in this part of the country, Shasta is beloved of campers and hunters, a seemingly endless expanse of pine, fir, and oak

the Sierra Club immediately upon returning home. It is also a new front in something else seemingly endless—the drug wars. Which is why I found myself, last August, knee-deep in Shasta's undergrowth, bushwhacking my way up a hillside with a group of Forest Service agents. Clad in dark camouflage and Kevlar vests, they carried M-16 rifles and hip-holstered pistols.

They were not being overzealous. In 2006, authorities here seized over \$700 million worth of illicit marijuana from gardens—the euphemistic name generally given to pot farms—planted in Shasta, most of it by trained, and heavily armed, Mexican growers. As *black book* >74

2006 MARIJUANA ERADICATION

Top 10 national forests in California



In California, every single national forest and park—even Yosemite, the crown jewel of the public-land system—has been infiltrated.



GREENING OF AMERICA

ABOVE: A view of Mount Shasta from Shasta-Trinity National Forest, where Mexican cartels reap their harvest. RIGHT: Forest Service agent Matt Knudson and Chiwa.



an occasional hiker myself, it was not hard for me to imagine being out on a trail (we were not far from one now, and only about a mile from the nearest road), my gravest concern a twisted ankle or the odd grizzly, only to stumble upon a garden and find myself facing a gun barrel. Things could go bad fast. They have before. In 2000, a grower shot a hiker and his young son. The year before, growers kidnapped a Bureau of Land Management botanist. In 2005, Forest Service agent Matt Knudson, walking a few yards ahead of me in Shasta, was on a raid near Los Angeles when a grower took two blasts at an agent. “Come harvest season they start bringing in more guns,” Knudson explained. He regularly recovers shotguns, AK-47s, even MAC-10s and Uzis.

Late summer—harvest season was beginning. After an hour of hiking, the air grew heavy with a familiar scent, and just as my mind was transported back to my college dorm room, we arrived at our quarry: Cannabis plants, many thousands of them sprouting five and six feet tall from the forest floor, came into focus, their thin, serrated leaves and hirsute emerald buds everywhere. This was no Grateful Dead concert parking-lot piddle, mind you; these specimens were the size of tropical fruit.

The growers had fled in a hurry the night before, it seemed, leaving their camp looking like a scene from Pompeii. Spread on a crate between two cheap tents was a freshly dealt hand of cards. Sleeping bags, worn and stained, lay in the tents near an outdoor kitchen outfitted with a propane-burning skillet. Sweatshirts, chain-store jeans, garbage bags, ramen-noodle wrappers, emptied cans of jalapeño peppers and El Pato brand tomato sauce, detergent bottles, and countless supermarket plastic bags littered the ground. Black PVC tubing fed a reservoir dug out of an embankment—a water system for drinking, bathing, and irrigation. The growers had bolted in such haste, they’d even left their shoes.

But there were no guns to be found: A bunch of felons, working under some very nasty auspices indeed, were now running around this bucolic paradise barefoot, cranky, and possibly in possession of some large automatic weapons.



Until recently, marijuana cultivation in the United States was mostly the province of small-time ex-hippies and the occasional rancher. In the last two decades, however, Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have taken over the business. Before 9/11, these cartels produced much of their marijuana in Mexico and ran it over

the border. But since then law enforcement has squeezed many smuggling routes, and the gangs have increasingly taken to growing it here.

This is their new, brazen approach: commandeering large patches of public land in the United States and smuggling in illegal growers to convert them into mega-gardens. They’re easy and cheap to grow and extremely difficult to detect, except from the air. In 2006, authorities seized nearly three million marijuana plants from public lands, a harvest with a potential street value of between \$10 and \$15 billion, nearly half of it in California. Most investigators I spoke to agree that the amount seized was a fraction of the total produced. In other words, growing marijuana on public lands is a business worth more money than *black book* >78

most Fortune 500 companies—more money, in fact, than the Mexican cartels (who, since the nineties, have wrested majority control of the American drug trade from their Colombian cohorts) make from such upper-shelf wares as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, a fact that has gone strangely underreported in the press.

“You have to be kind of crazy, as a drug trafficking organization, not to jump on the marijuana bandwagon,”



TRAFFIC JAM

FROM LEFT: Osiel Cardenas-Guillen, Cartel of the Gulf head, was captured in 2003. Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, Juarez Cartel head, is believed to have been arrested. Joaquin Guzman-Loera, Sinaloa Cartel head, escaped from prison in 2001. Jose de Jesus Amezcua-Contreras, Colima Cartel head, was arrested in 1998.

Patrick Kelly, a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration in Sacramento, told me. “In California, even if you are caught, the chances of being successfully prosecuted are almost nil.”

Prosecutors, usually a contrarian lot, agree. “The Mexican DTOs have figured out the penalties are less for marijuana,” said McGregor Scott, U.S. Attorney for California’s vast Eastern District, the hardest hit in the country.

Building cases is difficult, to put it mildly. A tangle of Mexican cartels and families control the trade. In turn, they enlist fierce Latin American gangs such as the Sureños and Mara Salvatrucha to distribute the weed. Many trails lead back to Michoacán, a rugged state on Mexico’s Pacific coast, but direct ties are hard to establish. Much like members of terrorist cells, the growers who are caught in the United States either aren’t privy to larger operational details or won’t talk if they are. This is understandable. According to the Associated Press, 2,000 people were killed last year in Mexico’s escalating drug wars, many of them *traficantes*, though not all; among the casualties were police and journalists.

Gardens—they’re also called “grows”—have been found in 15 states, from the Northwest to the Midwest to the Southeast, in a pattern that mimics the general trend of Mexican immigration. In California, every single national forest and park—from Shasta to Sequoia, Kings Canyon to Tahoe, and even Yosemite, the crown jewel of the public-land system—has been infiltrated. Each spring, the gardens grow more fecund and more growers are smuggled in. And each spring, they are bolder and better

armed. The average garden requires four men to cultivate it. If the higher estimates of total production are right, that adds up to the equivalent of about five large army battalions—roughly the number of U.S. troops dispatched to invade Grenada in 1983.

“An informant told us this year that word came down from the higher-ups to the growers to shoot if they need to,” Knudson tells me one frosty morning in December.

I have come to see him at his station in Upper Lake, a tiny town on the edge of Mendocino National Forest, a two-hour drive northwest of Sacramento. He doesn’t bother to specify the growers’ intended targets—himself and his fellow Forest Service agents. “It’s only a matter of time before a member of the public gets killed.”

Mendocino National Forest is ground zero in the marijuana battles, having led the country in seizures last year. Amazingly, though, Knudson is one of only four agents patrolling its million acres. A young-looking 34, with a goatee and close-cropped hair, he joined the Forest Service at 19 to pay for college, working at first as a firefighter. When he wasn’t putting out forest blazes, he was contending with tweakers and exploding kitchen labs: California has the distinction of supplying the country with much of its meth, as well as most of its pot. Indeed, the same cartels seem to control a large portion of both markets. “You can’t look at the whole picture,” Knudson tells me. “If you looked at the whole picture you’d be on medication.”

As we drive into the forest along dirt roads, Knudson’s M-16 rifle stowed within arm’s reach, he points to the location of a raided garden. Then he points to another one. And another. The pointing is ceaseless, and the gardens are everywhere, once you know how to spot them—usually no more than a few hundred feet from the road.



every year in March and April, the growers are driven in to begin planting at spots that have been scouted during the winter or used before. After being dropped off, they hike into the forest with their seedlings and sophisticated lightweight irrigation systems, even sprinklers with battery-powered timers. After planting, they live in the forest through the summer and into the autumn, when they harvest

their crop and then pack out the buds in trash bags. In their wake they leave terraced, eroding hillsides, dead trees, soil and water contaminated with pesticides, and tons upon tons of garbage—an eco-disaster. (The Forest Service estimates that 18,000 acres have been affected since 2005 alone.) With each passing year they become more comfortable with the terrain. “The growers know the land better than we do—they live in it,” Knudson says. “They know our schedules, they know when we work.”

That none of his colleagues have been killed yet is due to little more than luck, Knudson believes. In 2002, a deputy sheriff was shot, as was a Fish and Game warden in 2005. So far, five growers have been shot and one killed in shoot-outs with agents. “Working marijuana is not by choice—it’s pure necessity,” Knudson says. “You’d

“An informant told us this year that word came down from the higher-ups to the growers to shoot if they need to.”

think a Forest Service officer would be out dealing with fires or poaching or rowdy campers, that kind of stuff.”

“Would you rather be doing those things?” I ask him.

“Truthfully, no,” he says, smiling faintly. Chasing down the grower cells, he adds, has “become a passion for me.”

Passionate as Knudson may be, the frustration is audible in his voice. “My job is to protect and serve, but I can’t protect and serve a quarter million acres,” he says. The Forest Service, part of the Department of Agriculture, is one of the most capacious landholders in the United States, but it employs only about 500 full-time agents like Knudson. (The National Park Service, better staffed and resourced and less affected by marijuana cultivation, is in the Department of the Interior.) Help comes from local sheriffs, California’s Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, the D.E.A., and the drug czar’s office, which set up a special marijuana task force for California and an intelligence center in Sacramento in 1999. But even with that assistance, Knudson usually feels he’s on his own. The D.E.A. doesn’t disagree. “There’s no backup to call,” Agent Kelly told me. “There are no hospitals nearby.”

“We’re getting to the point of saturation,” Knudson admits. “We just can’t handle it.”

Mexico has a long and storied history with marijuana cultivation. *Traficantes* are folk heroes, and in raided gardens, Knudson regularly finds figurines depicting Saint Jesus Malverde. Not recognized in the Roman Catholic canon, Malverde, also known as El Bandido Generoso and El Narcosanton (roughly trans-

SMOKING GUNS

RIGHT: A shrine to Malverde—the patron saint of *traficantes*—on the side of a highway in Mexico. BELOW, FROM LEFT: Weapons seized during a drug bust; the Mexican army raids marijuana and opium fields in Michoacán, December 2006.



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lated: the Big Drug Saint), is the patron saint of the poor and, incongruously, drug traffickers. Some investigators believe the growers are indentured servants, brought over the border against their will. But Knudson disagrees. He thinks the growers brought to the United States hail from this drug demimonde.

“There’s a true science to it that’s probably been handed down from generation to generation,” he says. “As much marijuana as I’ve worked, I could never grow plants like *this*”—a foot or more long, inches thick. Knudson then points to the hillside where he chased down a grower who was packing a 9-millimeter pistol in a belt holster. That in turn leads him to recall the raid in which he pulled up a sleeping bag and found a grower hiding beneath it, holding a loaded MAC-10.

week after riding through Mendocino with Knudson, I meet Scott Burns in Washington, D.C. An otherwise unostentatious man who bears the raja-length title of Deputy Director for State and Local Affairs at the White House Office for National Drug Control Policy (colloquially known as the drug czar’s office),

Burns is the Bush administration’s point man on domestic marijuana eradication. His office, one block from the White House, is not much larger than Knudson’s ranger station room, but he wields considerably more power, having access to the czar’s \$12.6 billion budget. A faithful soldier in the war on drugs, Burns, like his boss, czar John P. Walters, professes to be a true believer where marijuana is concerned. “More 12- to 17-year-olds are in treatment for marijuana addiction than all other drugs combined,” he tells me when I point out that it’s hard to get Americans concerned about rolling papers and bongs, even when foreign cartels are involved.

But when I present him with the figures from California and tell him about my tour with Knudson, Burns appears almost unfazed. Unlike the Forest Service, the D.E.A., and the U.S. Attorney, Burns implies that the problem is under control, and he disputes the claim that only a fraction of the marijuana grown on public lands is being found. When I point out that public-land seizures have leapt over 300 percent in two years, he tells me the figure is “not about an explosion in plants, but a better efficiency in law enforcement.” This is a curious statement, considering that Walters devoted a mere \$3.5 million—.03 percent of the drug czar’s total budget—to the problem of domestic marijuana production in 2006.

Yet Walters says that combating

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marijuana is a cornerstone of his policy. He was chief of staff to the first drug czar, William Bennett, who was appointed by President George H. W. Bush in 1989. The current President Bush appointed him in 2001, and since then domestic production—thanks to grows like those I saw at Shasta and Mendocino—has reached an all-time high.

From his cramped quarters, Burns must vie with an indifferent, even hostile, public, and he must look south of the border at a situation that may well be intractable: Mexico is in the midst of a long and bloody drug war all its own. The cartels are battling each other for control of production and access routes to the United States, but they're also engaged in a lethal struggle with the state governments—when they're not infiltrating them. Gruesome violence afflicts Michoacán—stomping grounds of some of the cartels that dominate the American marijuana market—where cartel henchmen have lately developed a partiality for leaving human heads, with written warnings attached, outside government offices. Last year they rolled five of them onto a discotheque dance floor.

The bloodshed is dismaying, but Burns sees it as a potentially promising sign. "The violence can be an indication of many things, such as disrupting the cartels," he says. "If everything is running smoothly, there's no reason to shoot somebody. It can be an indication of good work by the Mexican and U.S. governments." D.E.A. agents and prosecutors are now working with a new crop of extradited *traficantes* and are moving their way up the cartel ranks, but their success, and Burns's, may depend on new president Felipe Calderón. So far, Calderón, who was educated in Mexico and the United States, seems eager to impress. During protests over his controversial election, he sent over 6,000 soldiers and federal police into Michoacán to set ablaze acres of marijuana fields. He didn't rely on the Michoacán police, because they are underpaid, hopelessly inept, and often corrupt.

But no one is safe from the cartels, it seems—perhaps not even the presidential family. In December, the body of a Calderón relative was found in Mexico City. Calderón has denied any explicit connection between the murder and the cartels, but the timing and the manner were ominous. It happened just after the crackdown in Michoacán and was carried out execution style.

Then there is the Left Coast of America, an interminable irritant to Burns, who describes California marijuana laws with Rumsfeldian coyness as "not helpful." California's judges, juries, and sentencing laws are famously forgiving,



WEED WHACKERS

Two strategists in the battle against marijuana. FROM LEFT: McGregor Scott, U.S. Attorney for California; Mexican president Felipe Calderón.

and in 1996 the state flouted federal law, passing Proposition 215, the Compassionate Use Act. Burns and many others believe that the law has opened the floodgates for a generation of clever dealers claiming to be medicinal marijuana distributors and has directly contributed to the precipitate spike in production. In other words, they say, not only is California law not preventing Mexican cartels from infiltrating the state, it's aiding them.



alters may not be particularly effective in combating marijuana—but then, neither were William Bennett and General Barry McCaffrey; nor, in all likelihood, will any future drug czar be. It should be news to no one that marijuana is

an enduring feature of American life—just as it is in Mexico, Europe, and Asia. Recent reports suggest that at least a third of Americans have smoked it. Rates of use among various age groups rise and fall, but talk to an average high school student—or, for that matter, an average middle-aged lawyer—and you'll find rather quickly that marijuana is not going away anytime soon.

Still, the war on drugs, no less than the drug wars being waged in places like Mendocino National Forest, will go on. For our last stop, Knudson took me to an eradicated garden hours deep in the woods. How anyone could have found the spot was mind-boggling. Knudson only noticed

it by chance from a helicopter while on his way to another garden across the ravine. The cannabis plants were gone, a field of truncated stalks left in their place. The ground, however, was still

buried ankle-high in the familiar refuse—plastic bags, clothes, the ever-present cans of El Pato. The garbage was still there because the Forest Service doesn't have the budget to get rid of it. All Knudson could do was hope the growers wouldn't come back to this spot in the spring—and hope, if they did, that some unfortunate hiker wouldn't stumble upon it. □

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