



NEWS RELEASE

Operation LOCCUST Joint Information Center
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Locating Organized Cannabis Cultivators Using Saturation Tactics

• Bureau of Land Management • California Department of Justice • California Highway Patrol • California National Guard
• Central Valley HIDTA • Department of Fish and Game • Drug Enforcement Administration • High Sierra Volunteer Trail
Crew • National Park Service • ONDCP/National Marijuana Initiative • Tulare County Sheriffs Department • U.S. Customs
• US District Attorney (Eastern District California) • U.S. Forest Service.

Release No. 080508-01

August 05, 2008

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OPERATION LOCCUST

**Multi-agency investigation results in 36 arrests and \$1.4 billion
in eradicated marijuana plants**

Tulare County, Calif. – John Walters, the Director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy joined agency heads from the Tulare County Sheriff's Office, California National Guard, land management and law enforcement agencies on Tuesday August 5, 2008 to announce Operation LOCCUST, an ongoing marijuana eradication effort being conducted throughout Tulare County which has led to 36 arrests and approximately \$1.4 billion in marijuana plants seized. Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies arrested several members of a drug trafficking organization that was involved in a large scale marijuana growing operation.

The Nation's Drug Czar, John Walters, said, "The violence and destruction associated with the marijuana trade are increasingly apparent throughout our system of State and Federal lands. Operation LOCCUST is successfully pushing back against the dangerous drug cartels that have infiltrated our public lands, as well as the demand for marijuana that fuels their criminal enterprises."

In 2007, the Tulare County Sheriff's Office had a record year of eradicated marijuana plants, with a total of 330,693 marijuana plants eradicated in Tulare County. In the first seven days of Operation LOCCUST, the eradicated plant count has surpassed this record year with a total of 340,685. Additionally, the operation has seized 138 lbs of processed marijuana, \$6,900 in cash, 27 weapons; three vehicles, 32 cases initiated, 12 search warrants served, and resulted in the arrest of 36 suspects associated with marijuana grow sites.

The progress of Operation LOCCUST can be attributed to the coordination and planning efforts involving a coalition of 14 state, local and federal agencies, dedicated to the removal of marijuana, investigation and apprehension of drug trafficking individuals. In addition, Operation LOCCUST has dedicated resources to the removal of infrastructure, hazardous material, garbage and waste left on public lands from these marijuana growers. The operation consists of over 240 personnel from the 14 state, local and federal agencies.

"I am impressed with the way these agencies have worked together in planning and coordinating this operation," commented Sheriff Bill Wittman. "This has set a standard for future large scale collaborations and can be used as model throughout the state."

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Beginning in November 2007, law enforcement officers from state, federal, and local agencies initiated resources for investigations into drug trafficking organizations involved in large scale marijuana grow site operations. During the course of these investigations, law enforcement officers identified 83 illegal marijuana grow sites.

As an example of these investigations, officials arrested four (4) suspects in the Ames Hole Gardens. The arrested suspects ranged in ages 22-24 years old. Approximately 7,600 marijuana plants and 78 pounds of processed marijuana were found at this location.

As a result of the Pine Creek investigation, officers arrested eight (8) suspects during a traffic stop along Yokohl Valley Road in Tulare County. The occupants of the vehicle were 19-48 years old and were armed.

An investigation lead by the Tulare County Sheriff's Office, along with the coalition, resulted in the arrest of 6 suspects and an eradication of over 80,000 plants in the mountain area east of Exeter. This case is ongoing.

Additionally, agents lead by the Cal. Dept. of Fish and Game arrested six (6) suspects in the Canebrake Ecological Reserve along the Tulare County Kern County border. These individuals were 20-58 years old.

The suspects were booked on charges including cultivation of marijuana, possession of marijuana for sale, child endangerment, possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, and conspiracy.

Law enforcement agencies in central and northern California have identified several marijuana grow sites located in the state's foothills and mountain areas controlled by drug trafficking organizations. With such a large number of these grows found in recent years, law enforcement has dedicated resources to the investigation, reclamation, and investigations to control this illegal activity.

Eradication and reclamation teams, along with a volunteer crew strive to remove irrigation lines, contaminants and trash from the land, streams and rivers. Removal of this material will help restore the land to its natural state and will remove the infrastructure which is imperative to deter drug trafficking organizations from re-establishing their operations. This process is the first stage of the restoration process and can typically exceed \$11,000 per acre.

To date, Operation LOCCUST has reclaimed 33% of the grow sites that have been eradicated during this operation. Over 245 trash bags, 14 dump truck loads (14,500 lbs), 29 cargo nets (5,000 lbs each) of waste which included 26.9 miles of irrigation pipe, 1,824 lbs of fertilizer, 22 lbs of pesticides, and 30 gallons of liquid chemicals have been removed from these grow sites. It has been proven that one acre of marijuana plants has a negative environmental impact on approximately 15 acres of adjacent land. Operation LOCCUST has a goal of reaching a minimum of 40% of reclamation during the operational phase with additional reclamation scheduled for the winter months.

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