

Joint Field Hearing on Illegal Drug Production on Public Land
Sequoia National Park, October 10, 2003

House Government Reform Subcommittee on Energy Policy, Natural Resources and
Regulatory Affairs
Congressman Doug Ose, R-Sacramento, Chairman

Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources
Congressman Mark Souder R-Indiana

Dear Congressmen Ose and Souder and Members of the Subcommittees,

My name is Joe Fontaine. I live in Tehachapi, California, and am a third generation Californian living in Kern County. I have worked with the staff of Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Park and Sequoia National Forest for over forty years regarding matters of land use policy. My input to them has been as a member of the concerned public concerning environmental issues. I have been a frequent user of public lands, primarily for recreational purposes, for nearly my entire life and hope to continue that activity with my family for many more years.

Although there has been a difference of opinion about many issues regarding management of public lands, surely we can all agree that the problem of cultivation of illegal drugs on public lands cannot be tolerated.

Today I am representing Wilderness Watch as well as myself. Wilderness Watch is a national organization that was formed to assure that units of the National Wilderness Preservation System are managed according to the mandate of the Wilderness Act of 1964. We look forward to celebrating the 40th anniversary of that Act next year. Our primary concern is to prevent gradual, seemingly insignificant changes in management of these areas, that can, over time, erode our concept of Wilderness as defined in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Without that kind of consistency Wilderness as we know it today, will be lost. We are dedicated to preventing environmental degradation of the current units of the Wilderness System and to make sure we pass on the same quality of Wilderness we enjoy today to our children and future citizens of this nation.

Not all of the drug production on public lands in California takes place in designated Wilderness areas. But the environmental and safety problems created by drug production in Wilderness areas are nearly identical to the problems elsewhere on public lands. Therefore even though the mission of Wilderness Watch is to work on problems in designated Wilderness, I am certain that the concerns about issues raised in this statement are shared by most if not all environmental organizations.

Diversion of water from streams and springs creates one of the most severe environmental impacts from marijuana cultivation. California, except for the north coast, is technically a desert. Streams and springs are the lifeblood of native plants and wildlife.

Without them populations of many species would decline and perhaps lead to local extinction. Some, already on the brink of extinction, could be driven to total extinction. Some species of wildlife can be dependent on a single source of water such as a spring. For example, there are some species of amphibians in California that have extremely localized populations. Other kinds of wildlife that range over a broader area can be dependant on localized sources of water. If the entire or significant part of the flow of a stream is diverted to irrigate marijuana farms, populations of fish, amphibians, and aquatic insects can be completely destroyed.

Many plant species are found only in the immediate vicinity of streams and springs. If these riparian areas disappear so will the plants dependant upon them. The plant life in turn determines what kind of wildlife will be found in a given area. Therefore if riparian areas are dried up not only will the plants disappear but also the wildlife dependant upon them.

Native plants are removed to provide space for the marijuana crops. In some cases hillsides are terraced for the crops. Often drip irrigation systems are used to water the illegal plants. All of this soil disturbance leads to serious erosion. When these plots are abandoned nothing is done to restore natural conditions so the impacts linger for years after the drug farming has ceased. In most cases the managers of the public lands do not have the capacity or the budget to restore the damage done. Local land managers, in many cases, have not been able to even remove the litter and trash brought in by drug growers because these operations are usually in remote roadless areas. This is particularly true in designated Wilderness areas which are usually in the most inaccessible parts of our public lands.

Pollution is another problem caused by these illegal operations. Some pollution is caused by artificial fertilizers and pesticides. The last concern of these illegal farmers is water and soil pollution. They also camp out at the drug growing sites for extended periods of time creating pollution from human sewage, certainly another very low priority problem from their viewpoint.

Litter and trash are not an insignificant problem. The operators of these drug farms are not interested in removing their trash. Getting the illegal drugs out is the only way they can make their operations pay off.

Poaching also impacts wildlife. Illegal drug farmers use small weapons to shoot wildlife to augment their diet. Hunting regulations and the impacts upon declining populations of wildlife would certainly not be a concern of these operators even if they were aware of the principles of good wildlife management.

The danger of destructive wildfire is exacerbated by drug farmers hiding out in remote areas and designated Wilderness. Just a spark from a campfire, a discarded cigarette, or a spark from a rifle bullet striking a rock is all it would take to start a disastrous wildfire. California is subject to wildfires every summer and fires started in the remote areas where these operations take place would be particularly difficult to control.

Public safety is another serious concern. According to press reports, the illegal drug farmers are always armed, sometimes with high caliber automatic weapons. Hikers, hunters, and fishermen have been confronted by armed drug farmers and in some cases shots have been fired. Local press reports have alerted the public to the dangers of visiting remote areas of public lands and warned them not to wander around in such areas alone. It is a very sad day indeed when the public, the owners of our federal lands, cannot use their own lands for recreation and enjoyment without feeling their safety may be at stake.

Although my experience has been primarily in central California, I would like to bring your attention to problems along our borders, particularly in Arizona. There have been even more serious problems in Organ Pipe Cactus National Park and the adjacent Cabeza-Prieta Wilderness. Although Wilderness Watch does not operate outings, we have had reports from some of our members who have visited those areas. Trash and garbage there have become so prevalent that it is impossible to enjoy a visit. The litter and sewage problems have made a visit to those areas a disgusting experience. Drug runners have been driving vehicles through the border fence and driving them until they run out of gas, get stuck or breakdown. The vehicles are then usually set on fire. It is almost impossible to remove these abandoned vehicles. Illegal roads, abandoned vehicles, and trash have become ubiquitous. As you probably know a park ranger was shot and killed in Organ Pipe and rangers must be fully armed as they go about their work in remote areas. I urge your sub committees to investigate the problems in those border areas as well as those here in California.

The National Park Service and the United States Forest Service have law enforcement personnel but they are barely adequate to address the normal problems that crop up from day to day. They have tried to deal with the drug farming problem but it is beyond their ability to resolve no matter how hard they try. Local law enforcement agencies have also tried to help but this is a much bigger problem than they are capable of dealing with and it is getting worse all of the time. It would be presumptuous of me to suggest how law enforcement officers should carry out their work but is obvious they need help. Certainly there needs to be coordinated law enforcement with more personnel and resources at their disposal. I urge Congress to address this problem and give the federal agencies and law enforcement agencies the help and support they need to stamp out this growing problem. Surely there is unanimous public support to deal with this problem immediately.

Joe Fontaine
President
Wilderness Watch