



High Times in the Woods?

Forest professionals aren't sure whether to inhale all the hype

By Barbara Coyner

Ten years ago, a logger in Potlatch, Idaho, stumbled onto a web of PVC pipe in the woods around Dworshak Reservoir. It was part of an intricate irrigation system, with plenty of pot growing amidst the timber.

Although the location was one of the most remote landscapes in north central Idaho, a ready supply of water and easy boat access made the place just about perfect for the illegal "grow" (the slang term for a pot plantation). It could have stayed hidden from the eyes of the law forever, except that by necessity, loggers sometimes operate in the same area.

Small Time Operations

"Every logger or forester has a story, but most find nothing large scale," says Josh Anderson, a forester for Vaagen Brothers Lumber in Colville, Wash. "All of us encounter some sort of hostility in the woods at some point, and we see evidence of grows from time to time. But mostly it's weird hippies, and they confront you with a shotgun and an ugly dog."

Several Northwest loggers confirm Anderson's take that the sporadic pot gardens are generally mom and pop operations, but the press has shined a light on another trend lately.

According to a front-page article in the November 5, 2009 Wall Street Journal, more grows are turning up on national forests or Indian reservations, and some of the operations are likely run by powerful Mexican drug cartels. With border clampdowns, the drug traffickers are taking their products closer to the consumers, and the U.S. earns the distinction of being the world's number one drug customer.

Law enforcement officials further suspect that illegal aliens might get talked into working for the criminals just to increase their earnings while staying in the states. Frequently resembling Native Americans in features, they can more easily blend in with reservation populations. Such hunches were reinforced during a major pot bust at the Warm Springs reservation in central Oregon last summer. The big bust rounded up millions of dollars worth of pot, along with a few of the growers.

Interestingly enough, loggers working in forests near the Warm Springs reservation haven't run into anything similar. Diane Eimers, a bookkeeper for Iron Triangle Logging in John Day, says the company loggers haven't seen anything noteworthy, nor has the community. "They probably stay aloof and don't come to town," she says of the illegal growers.

More Hype than Truth?

So are all the recent headlines merely hype to sell more newspapers? Some loggers reserve judgment, although most say they have been trained to look for signs of meth production or pot cultivation in the woods.

Chuck Wilson reminds loggers to document the time and place, leave the area immediately, and report activities to the county sheriff if they encounter anything questionable. Myron Emerson, a forester at Bennett Lumber in Princeton, Idaho,



says the Forest Service conducts relevant training workshops from time to time, most often focusing on meth and B.C. bud, a high quality pot traveling across the border from Canada. But he wonders if the workshops are really warranted or just another government program.

Stay Alert

Big operations do exist. In his 18 years in Forest Service law enforcement, Wilson spent five summers in Kentucky, cleaning out huge marijuana operations in cooperation with local and federal officials.

He likens the “grows” there to early day moonshining, with mostly locals involved. “A lot of these areas had 14 percent unemployment, and people were growing the stuff just to earn some money,” Wilson says, noting that sometimes the National Guard and helicopters joined the busts.

For illegal drug cultivation, the perfect grow location is remote, mountainous, off the beaten path, and close to a water source. As news of possible drug activities spreads, the public — and forest professionals — are cautioned to be wary as they work or recreate in the backcountry.

Some big-time growers carry sophisticated weapons and set up booby traps, monitoring valuable cash crops with sensors and surveillance cameras. Loggers and foresters, however, report few actual encounters with such deep level crime, perhaps because logging and recreation areas are generally closer to roads. Drug enforcement agencies report that serious grows often require two to four-hour hikes into dense forests.

Negative Side Effects

It's not just the criminal element that's worrisome. Law enforcement people say the multi-million dollar drug operations also endanger the forest itself. Grow tenders can be careless with their litter and filth, occasionally letting campfires get out of control. Investigators suspect that an unattended cooking fire led to the huge wildfire that swept through the Los Padres National Forest near Santa Barbara last summer.

As to what happens to the pot that's confiscated, Josh Anderson describes what usually happens in Colville. “Every year it seems that law enforcement goes out to the woods and does a big bust of some kind. Then they bring it into the mill, and we burn it in our burner.”

Does that mean the town inhales? “No,” he laughs. “But everyone seems to be at peace for a couple of days after they burn the stuff.”