



A MANY-HEADED MONSTER

Illegal marijuana's devastating impacts on agriculture



AN ESTIMATED TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WORK ON ILLEGAL MARIJUANA OPERATIONS STATEWIDE, AND EXPERTS SAY MANY ARE VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING, OR SLAVERY.

Getty Images

'It's getting ridiculous'

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

KLAMATH COUNTY, Ore. — On the drive between his family's cattle ranch in Sprague River and a grazing allotment in the Black Hills, Jimmy Gallagher pointed out what appeared to be illegal marijuana grows along the road, one of which had recently been raided by law

enforcement officers. "They're doing their damndest," he said of local law enforcement, "but it's hard because they're so outnumbered and underfunded." Todd Fleisher, Gallagher's brother-in-law, agreed. "It's getting ridiculous," Fleisher said. In the Black Hills, Gallagher stopped beside the watering hole where his family's cattle drink. Last year, Gallagher

said, thieves stole water from this spot, using trucks with 500-gallon tanks. The theft was especially troublesome during last summer's severe drought. Gallagher said he's even more concerned about his family's safety. The burgeoning illicit marijuana industry has had devastating impacts on rural Oregon and agriculture. Like a many-headed hydra monster in Greek mythology, illegal marijuana growers

have stolen water, polluted the land and water, violated land use laws, driven up farmland prices, caused labor problems and endangered citizens. Although new state laws and added funding are helping law officers wrangle the monster, farmers and community leaders say more still needs to be done.

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Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Todd Fleisher, left, with brother-in-law Jimmy Gallagher, at Fleisher's grazing allotment. The two say that thieves believed to be associated with illegal marijuana production have stolen water from the cattle watering hole.



Kile Henrich/MET

Living conditions at an unlicensed marijuana operation. In the center lies the remains of a pig carcass workers had been carving for food.



Kile Henrich/MET

Electrical wiring and cheaply built structures at a grow site.



Kile Henrich/MET

Marijuana plants at an illegal grow operation.

WSDA: Farmers in one county stand to lose 11,000 acres to buffers

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Mandatory riparian buffers sought by Gov. Jay Inslee could take up more than 11,000 acres of farmland in Skagit County and nearly 5,000 acres in Lewis County, according to the Washington State Department of Agriculture. Skagit and Lewis coun-

ties are two productive farm areas in Western Washington. The agriculture department also estimated 80-foot buffers could claim 913 acres in Yakima County and 55 acres in Chelan County. Although fewer acres would be taken by buffers in those farm- and orchard-rich Central Washington counties, the converted land would include ground now

producing high-value crops such as pears, apples, hops and mint. The department's estimate illustrates the potential reach of buffers, but there are too many unknowns to pinpoint how much farmland would be lost, Washington State Dairy Federation policy director Jay Gordon said Jan. 24. The agriculture depart-

ment assumed buffers would start at the edge of waterways, though Inslee's proposal opens the way for setbacks that begin at the edge of floodplains and equal the height of old-growth fir trees, which exceed 200 feet. "It's such a poorly crafted bill," Gordon said. "I don't know if I've seen legislation this sloppy in 30

years." The governor's office did not have an immediate comment Jan. 24. The governor worked with tribes on the proposed Lorraine Loomis Act, named for the late chairwoman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. Under the act, landowners could be fined up to \$10,000 a day for not plant-

ing strips of trees on both sides of waterways crossing their property. The Inslee administration and tribal leaders say riparian buffers are vital for salmon and that voluntary conservation programs are insufficient. Environmental organizations support the bill.

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U.S. Supreme Court to revisit Clean Water Act wetlands authority



Haraz N. Ghanbari/Associated Press File

Mike and Chantell Sackett of Priest Lake, Idaho, stand in front of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. Their legal dispute with the federal government over wetlands will be reviewed by the nation's highest court.

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farmers are counting on the U.S. Supreme Court to clarify the extent of federal Clean Water Act authority now that the justices have agreed to revisit the controversial subject. The nation's highest court will review an Idaho lawsuit to determine which wetlands should be regulated as "waters of the U.S." under that statute — a matter of longstanding legal debate.

"You've just had a lot of confusion in the courts over what is a regulable wetland," said Damien Schiff, senior attorney with the Pacific Legal Foundation, a libertarian law firm. "Because of that confusion, the court was convinced to finally try again." The agriculture industry is strongly invested in the matter because farms that come under Clean Water Act jurisdiction must comply with expensive and time-consuming regulations or face steep penalties.

"At the end of the day, that does mean the cost of business goes up," said Courtney Briggs, senior director of congressional relations with the American Farm Bureau Federation. Under a revision to the "waters of the U.S." definition proposed by the Biden administration, farmers would effectively need to hire lawyers and consultants to understand if their property is a regulated wetland, Briggs said.

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