

Rural Oregon residents at odds with large marijuana grows

By **Damian Mann**
Medford Mail Tribune

WILLIAMS, Ore. (AP) - Williams is known as one of Oregon's pot-growing capitals, but longtime residents have raised alarms over industrialized grows they say are ruining the character of this remote but close-knit rural community.

"People are pissed off," said Michael Johnson, chief operating officer of Siskiyou Sungrown Farms. "I've never seen anything like it."

Small artisan cannabis farmers find themselves pitted against giant marijuana greenhouse conglomerates, said Johnson, whose outdoor cannabis grow, which relies on sunlight and native soil, is often cited by locals as a responsible operation.

Community organizers are drafting a September ballot initiative they hope will lead to a moratorium on activities associated with future large-scale grows until regulations addressing the community's concerns can be implemented.

"This is not about marijuana, it's about bringing industry into a rural-residential area," said Sha'ana Fineberg, co-chair of the Williams Town Council and Citizens Advisory Committee. "It's asking for a moratorium on the activities that are negatively impacting the community."

Growing marijuana has long been a way of life in Williams, but gardens were relatively low-key until recreational marijuana use became legal in 2015. Now massive commercial operations have sprung up throughout the community, drawing concerns over increased traffic, fences that stretch for hundreds of feet, semi-trucks racing down rural roads and large greenhouses outfitted with bright lights and loud fans. Four such greenhouses, erected near Highway 238, look like giant rockets laid on their side.

Those who moved to Williams for the peace and quiet say their lifestyle has been threatened by dummy corporations buying up large tracts of land, making it difficult to determine who the real owners are, Johnson said.

Johnson's 40,000 square-foot operation on Williams Highway has worked with the state to avoid

installing the opaque fencing that annoys so many neighbors.

"You can't do it with less impact than this type of operation," he said. "Most of the frustration in the community comes from the big greenhouse operations."

Williams sits in the middle of Oregon's largest pot growing region. Jackson County has most marijuana producers of any county in the state at 299, according to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, which regulates the recreation marijuana industry. In Josephine County, where Williams is located, there are 213, the second highest in the state. Together the two counties have 512 producers, accounting for nearly one-third of the 1,535 licensed operations in Oregon.

There are 11 licensed recreational grow sites in Williams, with 12 more proposed, the OLCC said. To illustrate Williams' longtime acceptance of marijuana, the area in 2011 had 400 registered medical marijuana growers out of a population of 2,000, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Fineberg said the moratorium is not intended to stop recreational grows.

"Our goal is simple," said Fineberg, who is not a grower. "Our goal is to protect our community."

Community members, who've been airing their concerns and seeking solutions for weeks, are drafting a ballot initiative asking voters in the Williams ZIP code whether they want a moratorium on activities associated with new large-scale marijuana grows. If the initiative passes with 66 percent of the vote, organizers hope it will persuade Josephine County commissioners to adopt the moratorium for their unincorporated community.

Then the community and county officials could draft regulations limiting activities that threaten the rural nature of Williams. She said the regulations would apply only to Williams and only for any future operations.

Drafting the language for the proposed moratorium has been more complex than Fineberg and others expected. She said she's put in 20 hours a week for nine months. While the list of unwanted activities hasn't been completely fleshed out, controlling light and noise

from greenhouses are two issues that likely will be included in the moratorium.

Because most of Williams supports recreational cannabis, Fineberg said the moratorium has to be carefully written to avoid more conflicts.

"We don't want to create more division in our community," she said.

A brochure of best practices for cannabis growers is being distributed in the community to inform newcomers how they can avoid problems that might bother neighbors, including loud fans, light pollution, use of pesticides, erosion, setbacks, traffic, visual impacts and more.

"Every time we go out, we see another fence," said Kathy Escott, secretary of the Williams Grange. "And the greenhouses they're building, with concrete or gravel floors, are literally like paving over farmland."

For many residents, the increased traffic generated by these grow sites on rural roads poses a danger to children.

"One of the worst things is people are driving like maniacs up and down the roads right now," said Escott, whose husband grows six medical marijuana plants for her health problems.

She said longtime residents are usually considerate of neighbors and try to avoid the conflicts that have popped up over the past few years.

"Usually it's newcomers that just don't get it," Escott said. "They're not part of the community."

Escott said the fences have become a problem for wildlife, particularly deer that cross roads to get to creeks and now find barriers blocking their way.

A licensed recreational grow known as ShadowBox Farms has been a lightning rod for neighbor complaints.

Six months ago, the grow site was criticized because of noise from its fans, said Dani Jurmann, chief executive officer of Shadowbox.

When new fans were installed, the complaints shifted to the long fence, he said. Trees have been planted in front of the fence, and in a few years they will obscure the fence from view.

"We've done everything we can possibly do," Jurmann said. "I really

do believe in a couple of years, we will be all but forgotten."

Right now there is a lot of truck traffic delivering materials for drying sheds and other buildings. Once they're completed, he said, the traffic will be less than 10 percent of what it is now.

Jurmann said he and three families invested in the cannabis enterprise and bought 32 acres zoned exclusive farm use. They have two 40,000-square-foot greenhouse operations on two separate tax lots. Under Oregon law, farmland is allowed to generate noise, dust and other issues that may bother neighbors. Surrounding Jurmann's farm are properties zoned rural residential.

Jurmann said he chose the property because he likes Williams and thinks it's a beautiful area for his business.

He said the families invested close to \$1 million for the property and spent far more than \$250,000 into the operation, which he said pumps a lot of money into the local economy. He said he doesn't want to see any rules that sharply curtail the ability to operate a successful agricultural venture on farmland.

"I lose sleep about the 70 or 80 people who will lose their jobs," he said.

Jurmann said he personally wouldn't vote for a moratorium that would block certain activities of new cannabis businesses.

"My feeling is it is a lost cause," he said. "I think it's an interesting concept if a town like Williams wants to change state law. It's a noble pursuit."

But he said farmers can't be deprived of the essential tools needed to succeed.

"Greenhouses are a part of farming, and fans are a part of greenhouses," he said.

Mika Smith, vice chair of the Williams Town Council and Community Advisory Committee, said his community would like to develop local controls and local solutions to deal with the impact of this style of agriculture.

"We want reasonable regulations so when people come here they know what to do," Smith said. "People care about the land and quality of life out here and are concerned about the industrialization of our farmland."

Some of the friction has developed because large-scale growers don't take into account the impact of their operation on surrounding property owners.

"To me, it's a bit shocking how inconsiderate people are being to their neighbors," Smith said.

One large-scale grower removed a series of berms that prevented water from flooding a neighboring property, Smith said.

He said at least two lawsuits have been filed over these neighbor disputes.

Other issues could be resolved by improving state regulations. While many growers have wooden fences, Smith said it's possible to get approval from the state to install deer fencing, which many find more attractive. He said these options need to be clearer for prospective growers.

Smith said he is working with legislators to develop some regulations that could help Williams and other communities.

Some local business owners have seen a surge in customers from large commercial grow sites, but not others.

Rebekah Rumery, owner of Takubeh Natural Market & Agricultural Supply, said the big conglomerates that are behind some of the large grow sites have not become part of the community.

Rumery said her store hasn't seen a big influx of business from the large grows, though one of her customers does have a large grow site.

"It is challenging for us to see, because those big corporations are not supporting small business," she said.

Instead, many of the big operations order their equipment from large supply houses and have them delivered by semi-truck, Rumery said.

She said Williams is particularly concerned about these issues that also affect many areas of Oregon because many of the local residents are active environmentalists and take pride in living in a community that exists with nature.

"It's kind of sad to see," Rumery said. "But we're asking, 'How can we make it better?' We have to give them (the large growers) a standard to live by."

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