

Oregon cartels morphing their pot-growing ops

BY ANDREW SELSKY
Associated Press

SALEM — Foreign drug cartels that established illegal outdoor marijuana farms in Oregon last year are adapting as pressure on them begins to mount, law enforcement officials said Thursday, May 12.

New challenges are emerging as a task force created by the Legislature met for the first time to figure out how to combat cannabis-related problems, some of which threaten Oregon's legal, regulated recreational marijuana industry.

The Task Force on Cannabis-Derived Intoxicants and Illegal Cannabis Production is also responsible for recommending funding and command structure to enable law enforcement to combat illegal cannabis production, changes to state laws to address labor trafficking and water theft by the cartel-financed pot farms and regulations on genetic engineering of cannabis, among other issues.

"It started with a simple ask of help and it's turned into, 'Oh, my goodness, there's so much to deal with.' And so I think we just have to kind of take one at a time," said state Rep. Lily Morgan, a Republican from the southern town of



Shaun Hall/Grants Pass Daily Courier via AP, File

Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel stands amid the debris of plastic hoop houses, used to grow cannabis illegally, destroyed by law enforcement near Selma on June 16, 2021. Over 100 workers, most or all of them immigrants, were found at the site. Foreign drug cartels that established illegal outdoor marijuana farms in Oregon last year are expanding to large indoor grows, a state police official said Thursday, May 12, 2022.

Grants Pass, as the task force met via video link.

One of the biggest problems is the recent proliferation of illegal, industrial-sized marijuana farms.

In early 2021, hundreds of greenhouses began cropping up in southern Oregon's Josephine

and Jackson counties — some within city limits, others brazenly established along highways or tucked into remote valleys.

They were not licensed by the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission and are financed by foreign criminal cartels, from Latin America,

Europe and Asia, authorities have said. There were more pot farms than overwhelmed law enforcement officials could take down. Indoor illegal growing operations have long existed indoors, but now criminal gangs are pushing more in that direction, enabling them to

grow year-round, a task force member said.

"We're starting to hear about Josephine County, a lot of operations moving indoors," said Oregon State Police Sgt. Tyler Bechtel. "It makes it all that much harder to see it from the street, see it from the air, just smell it. And it's not a seasonal problem when you move indoors. It's a year-round problem."

Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel, though, said he hasn't heard of cartels operating in his county moving to indoor grows and are instead lowering their profile by establishing more numerous smaller grow operations. "They seem to be diversifying and spreading out operations to many small grows to avoid the attention," Daniel said in an email to The Associated Press. "We anticipated this change as we have primarily been focusing on the large grows and now smaller ones. It is a good business move for them and will slow us down."

The state police have identified dozens of ethnic-based drug trafficking organizations, each operating between five and 30 marijuana grow sites, Bechtel said.

Giving an idea of the scope of the problem, the Oregon

Criminal Justice Commission says 551,000 marijuana plants were seized in Jackson County, Josephine County and central Oregon's Deschutes County from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021. And that was a tiny fraction of the illegal crop. Authorities also seized almost \$3.4 million in cash in the raids.

"Despite legal avenues for purchases and sales of marijuana within Oregon, an illegal marijuana market continues to cause public safety concerns, including diversion of marijuana to other states, sales of marijuana to underage buyers, illegal cultivation of marijuana on private, state, and federal property, and enrichment of organized criminal operations," the commission said in a report.

The report examined results after an outlay of millions of dollars in grants to the three counties to address increasing unlawful marijuana cultivation and distribution operations in Oregon. The commission said it could not judge the effectiveness of the grant program "because the illegal marijuana market is an especially nebulous sector to evaluate."

The Task Force must provide its findings to an interim committee of the Legislature by Dec. 31, 2022.

Market

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The event, hosted inside the gym for weather's sake, had a students only block in the afternoon. From 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., the public, along with students' families, had a chance to check out the wares.

Student entrepreneurs designed their own logos, arranged product displays and put their crafts on sale.

The kids pulled out all stops, with plant starts, apparel, welding art, food, 3D prints and laser etchings.

"Yes, we get to use the laser," said Kai Ogan, who used them to make cutouts and keychains.

Anthony Christopher, who sold graphing squares and customized water bottles, said he used the school's 3D printer.

Some students worked as groups, while others were individuals, all setting out to make an exhibition of their talents and business savvy. All of them brought charm — and exact change.

"I didn't make everything, my sister made the stickers," said Gracie Morris, gesturing at a range of colorful designs at her booth, "But I did make the jewelry myself."

Campbell Vanderwiele's confections were immediately popular, and kept her on her feet as students queued to be served.

The market featured several students from the BHS Marketing and Design class.

"I knew we had a lot of young artists and entrepreneurs in the building," said teacher Toni Zikmund, who coordinated the Market Day. "And I wanted to give them a place to advertise their talent/business and hopefully make some sales."

"I would be thrilled if some of the vendors decided to set up for events around town, as we have some very talented students," Zikmund said. "I did have someone approach me about next year possibly having the kids set up at a downtown event, so maybe in the future we can work something out."

Rappelling firefighters train at Grant County Airport

BY STEVEN MITCHELL
Blue Mountain Eagle

Helicopters hovering over the Malheur National Forest are a telltale sign that fire season has arrived in Grant County.

Last week, the Grant County Regional Airport was the jumping-off point for essential training for a select group of wildland firefighters as the U.S. Forest Service hosted its yearly rappel certification training course.

Roughly 60 returning rappellers from Oregon and Idaho dangled from helicopters hundreds of feet in the air to practice rappelling, a method of descending rapidly using ropes and climbing hardware. They also participated in mockups and reviewed emergency procedures.

Adam Kahler, a national rappel specialist who started as a rappeller in Grant County in the early 2000s, said the training from May 2-7 was one of two annual recertification events the U.S. Forest Service hosts each year. There's also a rookie training in Salmon, Idaho.

Rappel-trained firefighters are an elite group. According to Kahler, there are just 300 Forest Service rappellers nationwide.

Last week's training was for veteran rappellers. Some, Kahler said, were coming

back for their 15th year, while others were coming back for their second or third season.

The training session, he said, is a chance not only to come back and do crew training but it also provides an opportunity for multiple crews — rappellers, helicopter spotters, and pilots — to work together again.

Kahler said a rappel crew's specialty is roping into small, remote, quick-response fires.

All of the training is standardized. So, when a crew is called out, depending on the location, they can be on a fire in as little as an hour. That's why the training is so important between the multiple crews, Kahler said.

"(Rappelling) is just a very quick, efficient way to get people on the ground where they need to be," he said.

Kahler said the rappel crews do not bring on new firefighters. Instead, they look for experienced firefighters who bring a solid skill set with them.

When the Forest Service dispatches a crew to a remote area, they have limited supervision.

Typically, he said, each crew is between two and four people, and they go out in the woods and make decisions on their own.

"We're looking for very experienced, very fit people," Kahler said.



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

Rappel crews participate in Forest Service certification training at the Grant County Regional Airport on Thursday, May 5, 2022.

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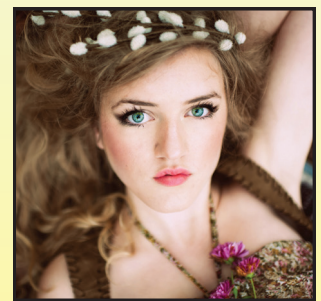
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