

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

JACKSON COUNTY

Officials seek \$7M to tackle illegal pot

BY VICKIE ALDOUS
Mail Tribune (Medford)

Jackson County plans to ask the state for \$7.2 million to tackle the billions of dollars worth of illegal pot operations proliferating across the Rogue Valley.

The money would fund 37 new employees, ranging from new Jackson County Sheriff's Office detectives to code enforcement officers to more staff for the Jackson County District Attorney's Office.

Jackson County Commissioner Rick Dyer said the request is what the county needs over a year to make growing illegal marijuana uncomfortable and risky for those breaking the law.

Without enough funding from the state and blocked from enacting their own local taxes on growing operations to fund marijuana enforcement, Southern Oregon counties have fallen far behind on busting illegal pot operations, Jackson County officials say.

State agencies charged with regulating the hemp and marijuana industries and agricultural water use also can't keep up with the volume of illegal operators.

Southern Oregon is at the tip of the so-called Emerald Triangle, a famous marijuana growing region that includes Northern California.

Jackson, Josephine, Klamath and Douglas County sheriff's offices regularly bust grows, processing and storage sites with tens of millions of dollars worth of illegal marijuana. The largest sites this year have surpassed the \$100 million mark — including a potato shed found stuffed with marijuana worth more than \$100 million in Klamath County and a massive growing site with an estimated \$200 million worth of marijuana plants in Josephine County.

Jackson County Administrator Danny Jordan said the Jackson County Sheriff's Office can currently bust about 40 illegal grows per year.

Jackson County officials estimate there are 2,000 legal and illegal hemp and marijuana sites locally.

Law enforcement agencies in Southern Oregon say foreign cartels are behind many of the illegal grows in the area. The cartels know some of the grows will get busted, but the rest will generate vast sums of money.

"There's literally billions that this is



Submitted, file
More than 17,000 pounds of marijuana buds were discovered Oct. 19 at a downtown Klamath Falls warehouse

worth to cartels," Dyer said.

As a general rule of thumb, police estimate, a single marijuana plant can generate \$1,000 if sold on the black market.

Growing marijuana is legal in Oregon and raising hemp is legal across America. Many growers ignore regulations that govern those crops and sell to states where marijuana is illegal — and fetches a much higher price.

Locally, more than half of licensed hemp grows are fronts for marijuana,

according to state regulators who tested hemp grow sites this year.

Hemp doesn't contain high levels of THC, which gets users high. But without testing, hemp plants are indistinguishable from marijuana plants.

Jackson County officials believe they can get state regulatory agencies to voice support for the county's nearly \$7.3 million funding request. The request will go to the Oregon Legislative Fiscal Office Emergency Board. Often called the e-board, the board allocates emergency funds when the Oregon Legislature isn't in session.

State regulatory agencies such as the Oregon Department of Agriculture, the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission and the Oregon Water Resources Department are themselves overwhelmed by the flood of illegal hemp and marijuana grows and water theft.

Jordan said Jackson County and other Southern Oregon counties needs millions of dollars every year to tackle illegal operations. They need stable, predictable funding so they can hire, train and keep additional workers such as detectives.

Jordan noted the nearly \$7.3 million request doesn't include money to address environmental damage from plastic, dismantled greenhouses, human feces, pesticides and dangerous electrical wiring left behind by illegal growers.

The state Emergency Board is sitting on a larger pile of money than usual this year, in part because Oregon's budget was buttressed by federal pandemic aid.

"From a budget standpoint, this should be a no-brainer," Jackson County Commissioner Dave Dotterer said about the county's funding request.

Dotterer said illegal operations are undercutting hemp and marijuana businesses that follow laws.

Jackson County may also seek tighter regulations on hemp and marijuana, taxes on grows, bigger fines, restrictions on water hauling and other changes to laws governing the industries.

Jordan said state regulators and Oregon legislators from Northern Oregon counties don't always understand the full impact of illegal grows in Southern Oregon.

U.S. government tells judge gray wolves do not need protection

BY MATTHEW BROWN
Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — A U.S. government attorney urged a federal judge Friday to uphold a decision from the waning days of the Trump administration that lifted protections for gray wolves across most of the country, as Republican-led states have sought to drive down wolf numbers through aggressive hunting and trapping.

Wildlife advocates argued that the state-sponsored hunts could quickly reverse the gray wolf's recovery over the past several decades in large areas of the West and Midwest.

They want U.S. District Judge Jeffrey White in Oakland, California, to put wolves back under the legal shield of the Endangered Species Act, which is meant to protect animals from extinction.

Federal officials contend that wolves are resilient enough to bounce back even if their numbers drop sharply due to intensive hunting. They say protections are no longer warranted.

At stake is the future of a species whose recovery from near-extinction has been heralded as a historic conservation success. That recovery also has brought bitter blowback from hunters and farmers angered over wolf attacks on big game herds and livestock.

Friday's hearing focused on a much more arcane, legal issue: Were wolves properly classified under the endangered act prior to losing their protected status last year?

A U.S. Justice Department attorney said they were not, because of changes to the act by Congress in 1978. That means the wolves at issue do not make up a valid "species" that is distinct from a smaller number of wolves not included in November's decision to lift protections by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



ODFW via AP
In this Dec. 4, 2014, file photo, released by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, a wolf from the Snake River Pack passes by a remote camera in eastern Wallowa County. In court, government attorneys are defending a decision from the waning days of the Trump administration to lift protections for gray wolves across most of the U.S.

"Congress was very clear in the statute: If there is not that species, the service does not have the ability to regulate it," said Michael Eitel with the Justice Department's natural resources division.

Judge White questioned if the government's approach amounted to a "back door" way to remove protections.

Eitel said in response that the wildlife service was "not trying to skirt its obligations" to wolf recovery, but attorneys for the wildlife groups insisted it was.

"They cannot take this shortcut," said Kristen Boyles with Earthjustice, representing Defenders of Wildlife and other groups. "One of the casualties of the Fish and Wildlife Service argument is that we are

not here today talking about the key issues of what protections wolves need, where those protections are needed."

White did not issue an immediate ruling.

The lawsuit does not cover wolves in all or portions of six states in the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains, where the animals lost protections a decade ago.

Federal officials in September said they would consider

if those protections should be restored in Western states in response to loosened hunting rules in Idaho and Montana. That could take a year or longer.

In Wisconsin, where hunters surpassed a state harvest quota last winter and killed 218 wolves in just four days, this season's hunt was recently put on hold by a state judge, two weeks before it was set to begin.

Conservatives on a state wildlife board had set Wisconsin's kill limit at 300 wolves, prompting a lawsuit from wildlife advocacy groups and a federal lawsuit from a half-dozen Chippewa tribes, which consider the wolf sacred.

A state agency controlled by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers later took the unprecedented step of unilaterally reducing the kill limit to 130 wolves, openly defying the board.

Wolves once ranged most of the U.S. but were wiped out in most places by the 1930s under government-sponsored poisoning and trapping campaigns.

A remnant population in the western Great Lakes region has since expanded to some 4,400 wolves in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

More than 2,000 wolves occupy six states in the Northern Rockies and Pacific Northwest after some of the animals from Canada were reintroduced in Idaho and Yellowstone National Park starting in 1995. Protections for wolves in the Rockies were lifted over the last decade and hunting of them is allowed.

However, wolves remain absent across most of their historical range. Wildlife advocates argue that continued protections are needed so they can continue to expand in California, Colorado, Oregon and other states.

Wyoming also allows wolf hunting, and officials are considering wolf hunting seasons in Michigan and Minnesota.

The Biden administration's defense of the removal of protections under Trump has angered environmentalists who hoped the election of the Democrat would shift U.S. policy on wolves.

Democratic and Republican administrations alike, going back to former President George W. Bush, have sought to remove or scale back federal wolf protections first enacted in 1974.

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