

California Marijuana Boom Destroying 25% of Stream Flows

By Chriss W. Street
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As Breitbart News reported in “Pot Tax: Sacramento Politicians ‘Jonesing’ for a Spending Fix,” the Democrat-controlled California Legislature is desperate for marijuana taxes, which could arise from a 2016 ballot initiative legalizing marijuana, in hopes of gaining a consistent new tax revenue source.

However, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) estimates that illegal pot growing is drying up watersheds and causing some at-risk fisheries to approach collapse.

Department of Fish and Wildlife officials estimated that marijuana production on California public lands has increased by 55 to 100 percent in fragile north coast watersheds over the past five years. This boom is destroying fisheries in some California rivers and streams that have dried up.

A CDFW-sponsored study of four northwestern streams found that some illegal marijuana groves consumed 20-to-30 percent of stream flows during the “dry summer low-flow season—a crucial period for salmon and other species—as well as marijuana cultivation.” The cultivation has led to a spectrum of environmental challenges that are associated with habitat damage.

Peter Moyle, a fisheries expert with University of California Davis and a member of the Public Policy Institute’s Water Policy Center, reported, “All of these operations are taking water directly from streams, sucking away water from endangered Coho salmon, steelhead, tailed frogs, and other stream-dwellers, while damaging the banks of the streams. These diversions require permits—both from CDFW for stream alteration and from the State Water Board for diverting water—but few such permits seem to have been issued.”

Governor Jerry Brown earmarked \$3.3 million in last year’s budget in an effort to begin enforcing marijuana cultivation rules in an effort to slow water depletion and that threatens endangered species.

The Public Policy Institute of California reported, “The multi-agency Cannabis Pilot Project will enforce environmental protections in cannabis cultivation. The state’s Fish and Wildlife Watershed Enforcement Team inspects farms and seeks to permit them and bring them into compliance, but the understaffed team has been able to visit only a tiny portion of the state’s farms.”

At a recent California Senate hearing called to crack down on illegal water diversions by pot farms, the State Water Resources Control Board stated that a new permitting process to curtail

illegal water diversions in in the works. But under questioning, the Board pointed out that funding for compliance has never been allocated by the Legislature.

The Control Board said it could create a better regulatory system, but that to cover “the ground” would require a targeted and reliable sources of funding to address the state’s environmental challenges. It reminded Senators that there currently are no tax revenues from California’s nearly \$1 billion-a-year medical marijuana market allocated for environmental protection.

The California Legislature plans to ask voters in 2016 to approve legalizing possession of marijuana for recreational use in an effort to backfill the state’s long term deficit, but paying for the environmental impacts of marijuana cultivation is not in the plan.