

Electric co-op estimates \$1 million in electricity stolen each by pot growers

Jay Meisel | Highlands Today
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SEBRING — These days you won't find a marijuana production surcharge on Glades Electric Cooperative bills.

But electricity users are almost surely paying higher rates because marijuana growers stole electricity, Paul McGehee, director of business development, said.

During a week when Highlands County deputies raided three marijuana growing operations, McGehee said that marijuana growers in Highlands, Glades, Okeechobee and Hendry counties steal as much as \$1 million worth of electricity a year. Since Glades is not a profit-making utility, "all costs are borne by our members. They're stealing directly from our members," he said.

And it's theft of utilities that is often a key factor in Highlands County investigators finding the marijuana farms.

McGehee said that typically such increased utility use results in an overload of the system, leading to outages. When those problems occur in a particular area, the utility investigates to find out the cause of the problems. Arrest reports in the cases said that hot transformers led to the arrests.

Highlands, Glades, Okeechobee and Hendry counties aren't the only areas where utility theft is a problem.

Britain estimates that one third of electricity theft involves illegal growing of marijuana, according to an NBC news article.

The site, Utility Dive, has questioned whether marijuana is a gateway drug to electrical theft. And Greentechgrid.com estimates that \$5 billion in electricity is used annually to grow marijuana in the United States.

In the latest cases in Highlands County, deputies found at 9805 Payne Road, 22 plants weighing 41.5 pounds growing in an outbuilding on the property, Highlands County Sheriff Susan Benton said in a press release.

That led to the arrest of Aldalberto Castillo, 45, at the residence. He was charged with possession of more than 20 grams of marijuana, trafficking in marijuana, possession of marijuana with intent to sell, manufacture or deliver, altering or tampering with utility service and owning or renting a structure or vehicle where drugs are manufactured.

At another residence, 4000 Eiland Drive, Highlands County deputies discovered 28 plants weighing 86 pounds. The marijuana was being grown in a concrete underground bunker built next to the house, the sheriff said. She added that a hatch allowed someone to get into the bunker from the house.

That led to the arrest of Dario Santos-Diaz, 50. He was charged with altering or tampering with utility equipment, possession of marijuana with intent to sell, manufacture or deliver marijuana, possession of more than 20 grams of marijuana, trafficking marijuana, owning or renting a structure where drugs are manufactured and possession of drug equipment.

Highlands County deputies raided another residence in Lorida earlier in the week and three earlier this year in the Venus area.

That the marijuana was grown in rural areas served by Glades isn't surprising, McGehee said. But he said he's been aware of grow houses in cities and the growers making it look like the house was occupied by residents.

With as many as eight to 11 marijuana farms potentially operating with stolen electricity at any one time in the four-county area, the value of the stolen power adds up quickly, McGehee said.

With tougher laws on the books, Glades has had some success in recouping some of the stolen power, he said.