Hiker finds illegal marijuana grow worth $7 million in San Isabel National Forest

By Kieran Nicholson
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Officials found two illegal marijuana grows, with more than 7,400 plants, on federal forest land near Rye, a town of about 200.

Investigators were tipped off by a hiker who stumbled upon the grows in the Huckleberry Hills area northwest of Rye. On Friday, detectives went to the site and "discovered thousands of marijuana plants," the sheriff's office announced.

The illegal grow is the second largest uncovered in Pueblo County and the fifth found in fields on or near the San Isabel National Forest in the past five years, the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office reports.

About 2,000 marijuana plants were found in one field and another 5,400 in a lower field. Investigators estimate the value of the marijuana at $7 million.

Evidence, including cook stoves, food containers and blankets indicates that people had been living in the area, police said. No suspects, however, have been arrested.

"These grows are not indigenous to Colorado and the water and fertilizers required for these grow operations represent a clear environmental hazard for our beautiful Colorado mountains," Sheriff Kirk Taylor said. "We certainly appreciate and encourage anyone who is out enjoying our mountains and sees something that they think is suspicious, to report it."

The latest illegal grow is the fifth such operation found in or near the San Isabel National Forest since 2012. In August 2012, the sheriff's office found and destroyed two marijuana grows with more than 9,400 plants in the San Isabel National Forest.

In October 2015, another grow of 2,400 plants was found near Millset Trail in the San Isabel National Forest, the release said, and in July 2016, 1,000 marijuana plants were found growing on private property near the Table Top Mountain area.