

# Marijuana grow worth up to \$8 million found in forest near Aspen

By Jesse Paul

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An illegal marijuana grow operation, worth as much as \$8 million, was found in the White River National Forest north of Aspen last month, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Officials finished eradicating the 2,600-plus mature plant grow on Wednesday near Ruedi Reservoir, east of Basalt.

"A forest is not a place for growing stuff like that," said Bill Knight, a spokesman for the service.

Hunters in the area smelled the operation and followed the scent before stumbling upon, and reporting, the grow. Knight said he could not reveal exactly where the operation was found because officials believe there may be similar ones nearby.

Since 2009, 34 illegal marijuana grow sites with over 65,000 plants have been found and located in national forests in Colorado. A similar grow with about 3,000 plants was found in the Aspen area last year by hunters near McClure Pass.

"It's real difficult, even when you put it under surveillance, to catch these folks," Knight said. "They pay the price by losing their crop."

The forest grows create problems because of irrigation materials left behind and fertilizers that can damage the land, Knight said.

"Growing marijuana on national forest lands will not be tolerated," Scott Fitzwilliams, supervisor for the White River National Forest, said in a statement. "These cultivation sites can cause significant resource damage and endanger visitors who may stumble upon large amount of marijuana with a high street value."

Officials say they calculated the crop's worth by estimating that each plant produces about one pound of processed cannabis that is worth roughly \$2,500.

Crews eradicating the site also removed a make-shift camp they believe was used by the growers.

Knight said the service's law enforcement division is working with local authorities to investigate the grow, adding that no arrests have been made in the case.