

Cleaning up after pot growers challenges North Coast landowners, agencies

BY GLENDA ANDERSON

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | July 24, 2014, 6:29PM

ELK — Deep in a private Mendocino Coast forest, trees and brush give way to terraced clearings, miles of crisscrossing black irrigation tubing and campsites littered with cooking pans, empty food and beer cans, sleeping bags and toxic pesticides. They are the remnants of a marijuana garden where a multi-agency law enforcement effort last year seized more than 8,000 plants.

The environmental damage here is a microcosm of what's happening nationwide as illegal pot cultivation continues to thrive despite decades of eradication efforts. Marijuana operations claiming to be medicinal, and thus legal in California, also are expanding exponentially, largely without regulation.

Marijuana growers have clear cut forests, eroded hillsides, dammed, polluted and sucked dry streams and poisoned wildlife. It's not uncommon to find dead animals near pot gardens, wildlife officials say.

"This is probably the worst environmental crime I have ever seen in my life. It is literally ripping out the resources of this state," said California Fish and Wildlife Capt. Nathaniel Arnold, who heads the department's marijuana enforcement team.

Nationally, more than 4 million marijuana plants were seized last year from outdoor gardens according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. Of those, almost two-thirds, 2.7 million, were found in California. Many more plants are being grown for alleged medicinal uses and some of those pot growers are guilty of the same environmental crimes as illegal cultivators, according to regulatory agencies charged with protecting natural resources.

The pot gardens are of particular concern now, as California's worst drought in decades drags on and water becomes increasingly precious. Pot plants are thirsty, requiring an average of 6 gallons a day each, according to wildlife officials. Some marijuana advocates say water use is much less than that estimate, while others say it can be nearly three times as much, depending on the size of the plant and where it is being grown. That adds up to billions of gallons and, in some watersheds, insufficient or poor water quality for fish, undoing millions of dollars in work aimed at restoring endangered species.

"It's a huge, huge impact. It's been listed as a very high threat and stressor in our recent recovery plans for coho salmon and steelhead," said Rick Rogers, a fisheries biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Marijuana farming, unlike other types of agriculture, is mostly unregulated and growers, including purported medicinal producers, often operate outside the law. They've bulldozed hilltops without permits, illegally dammed streams to supply water to their plants and used pesticides that are so dangerous they're not sold in this country.

The state's Campaign Against Marijuana Planting reported dismantling 89 illegal dams or reservoirs used to irrigate pot gardens in 2013.

Fish and Wildlife officials last year removed 129 illegal dams, officials said.