

Black Market Weed Rampant on Colorado Public Land

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Mainstreet.com | June 13, 2014

NEW YORK (MainStreet) — Black market marijuana, which many expected to disappear after the substance was legalized, is thriving. It is grown on public land owned by the federal government in the state. Worse it is controlled by Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs).

According to the latest information from the U.S. Forest Service, provided to *MainStreet* in response to an inquiry, marijuana production is booming. The facts are alarming.

The statistics for marijuana cultivation sites that are impacting U.S. Forest Service lands in Colorado indicate that six national forests are affected: Pike, San Isabel, Arapaho, Roosevelt, White River, and Gunnison.

For the period from 2008 to 2014, the Forest Service found 32 cultivation sites in 12 counties. They involve 100,507 plants.

"The black market retail value of marijuana varies from \$2,500 to \$4,500 per pound for high grade product," said Chris Streb, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) spokesperson for the Rocky Mountain region. "Lesser grade [with lower THC content] ranges in price from \$500 to \$1,000."

The average price of marijuana is pegged at about \$2,500 per pound. Each plant yields an estimated one pound.

This places the value of known black market pot grown on federal lands between about \$50 million for low grade to \$452 million for the high end product. It would be \$252 million using the average price per pound. Whatever price one wants to use, the value is disconcerting.

More than 80% of the sites are on what is known as the "Front Range," according to the Forest Service. These are the foothills of the Rockies said Streb. Approximately 50% of the sites were found in Douglas, Jefferson and Boulder Counties.

What is most disturbing is who controls these cultivations. According to the USFS, approximately 65% of the sites were believed to be operated by DTOs in 2013. Since 2008, almost 95% of marijuana located on USFS land are believed to be controlled by DTOs.

This marijuana is not being sold in the local state accredited retail outlet either. Streb said there is no evidence or indication to date that the marijuana cultivated on national forest lands is sold through regulated marijuana suppliers in the Colorado system.

Fortunately, unlike other areas where pot is grown illegally, Forest Service personnel have not encountered any booby trap activity or violent incidents. But marijuana cultivation does cause environmental damage to the forests.

"Marijuana cultivation on national forests endangers public safety, degrades water quality, introduces invasive plants, leaves garbage and negatively impacts forest health," said Strebig. "Cutting down trees, diverting water and the use of chemicals are all effects of marijuana cultivation."

He also said that while it is too early to tell - it does not seem legalization has reduced illegally grown marijuana.

"This is the first growing season since the passage of Colorado's recreational marijuana law," Strebig explained. "As of yet, we do not have any evidence that the legalization of recreational marijuana has diminished the production or cultivation of marijuana on national forest system lands."

So it seems that for the time being, legalization has not lead to the demise of the black market. But advocates say the law is the problem.

"In general, regarding cannabis being grown on federal (or state) land is the pure outgrowth of prohibition," said Allen St. Pierre, executive director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML). "If federal and state law enforcement don't want illegal growers, then they need to stop supporting the status quo of prohibition as there are no legal problems in America with people illegally growing tobacco, grapes, hops, barley or apples on federal and state lands."

But opponents take the opposite perspective. They feel legalization leads to more crime.

"By legalizing marijuana in Colorado, we have become the black market for about 40 other states that we can document," said Tom Gorman, director of the Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. "So instead of eliminating it we have become it. We are also the black market for those under twenty-one."

"Will that fade away if the legal market prices drop? It is too early to say. But we know that commercialization of medical marijuana did not end the black market," he concluded.

Whether Colorado's legalization experiment will decrease black market pot remains to be seen. But studies indicate that while legalized gambling decreased illegal gambling - legalization increased the amount of gamblers