# Growers abandon around $8.3 million in illegal pot

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GYPSUM — Just because pot is legal in Colorado does not mean you can grow it on someone else's land.

In the past week, illegal growers walked away from 3,630 marijuana plants worth as much as $8.3 million — 1,000 in Eagle County near Cottonwood Pass, south of Gypsum, and 2,630 plants near Ruedi Reservoir in Pitkin County.

A hunter trekking in the Cottonwood Pass area, south of Gypsum, found the pot plants growing on private land on Oct. 1. The hunter did not strap any of it to the hood of his truck, as hunters used to do with their quarry but instead notified the Eagle County Sheriff's Office.

When deputies arrived, they found an elaborate irrigation system bringing life-giving fluids to the 1,000 pot plants. They also found a campsite nearby.

Deputies hid and watched for a long time, but no suspects showed up to harvest their crop. Eventually, because the plants would have to be harvested before the frost and because it has already begun to frost at night, deputies decided no one was coming to claim the makeshift pot plantation. Deputies then confiscated and destroyed all of the marijuana plants.

The landowner did not know the pot was there, the Sheriff's Office said, and was happy when it was gone.

With perfect conditions outdoors, a mature pot plant can yield up to around 18 ounces, according to The Weed Blog.

If those 1,000 plants all yielded 18 ounces, at $196 per ounce for medium grade weed according to priceofweed.com, the growers would have yielded $352,000.

The case remains under investigation, the Sheriff's Office said in a written statement.

Pitkin pot connection?

It's not clear whether the Cottonwood Pass pot plantation was related to the Ruedi Reservoir reefer in Pitkin County found last week, but investigators are looking for connections, said Jessie Mosher, public information with the Eagle County Sheriff's Office.

The Pitkin County pot plantation near Ruedi was on public land, and growers walked away from a crop worth between $6 million and $8 million, said Scott Fitzwilliams, forest supervisor with the White River National Forest.

Forest Service workers pulled 2,630 plants out of the ground and destroyed them.

That site was also found by hunters, Fitzwilliams said.

That growing operation was simple but effective, Fitzwilliams said. A “check dam” on a nearby creek created a water source for irrigation. A gravity-fed piping system delivered water to the site.

The pot plants, which were up to 6 feet tall, were growing in three or four clumps in natural clearings between subalpine fir and aspen trees in an area smaller than 2 acres, Fitzwilliams said.

The Forest Service is keeping the exact location under wraps while it finishes its investigation.

In September 2013, an illegal operation worth more than $8 million was found near Hayes Creek in the Redstone area. Forest Service officials yanked 3,375 marijuana plants out of the ground.

Since 2009, 34 illegal marijuana grow sites and more than 65,000 marijuana plants have been eradicated from national forests in Colorado.

The agency estimates the plants produce an average of 1 pound of marijuana per plant.

While Colorado voters approved use of recreational marijuana, the federal government still views pot as illegal, the agency said in a statement.