

## Illegal Marijuana Grows in Our Region

*By Assemblymember Marie Waldron*

The recreational use of marijuana, legalized by Proposition 64 in 2016, has not eliminated illegal marijuana grow sites in many rural areas throughout the state. The illicit marijuana market continues to thrive, financed by consumers seeking to avoid taxes imposed on sales at legal dispensaries.

In our own region, huge illegal marijuana farms have been seized over the past few years. The Riverside County Sheriff's Department reported that in 2 years it located 1,576 illegal grows, with 2.5 million plants. The human toll can be staggering, including murder. At a grow house east of Temecula, seven people were found shot to death in 2020. Sadly, child labor is sometimes used and the sites are often patrolled by armed guards, are frequently booby-trapped, and can contain other hazardous narcotics, including fentanyl. Rural San Diego County has been heavily impacted by illegal grow sites, and in San Bernardino County, the Sheriff's office considers marijuana grows to be the biggest quality-of-life issue.

It's common for investigators to find dangerous chemicals such as carbofuran, a pesticide banned in the U.S. Five deputies exposed to the pesticide recently had to be hospitalized. Other banned insecticides in use at the grow sites include methamidophos and methyl parathion -- telltale signs of their use include dead wildlife found nearby. Toxic wastes and pesticides leach into the soil and pollute the water. Illegal dams are sometimes built for irrigation, streams have been diverted, and land is unnecessarily cleared, causing erosion. The environmental costs are huge.

Property owners in rural areas need to be vigilant, especially if their property is not tended regularly. For a variety of public safety and environmental reasons, these illegal grows need to be stamped out now! If you suspect an illegal grow site, call the CalTip hotline at: 888-334-2258.

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