

## **Pot operation rooted out in Capitol Forest**

Plants spotted from air; three suspects in custody

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THE OLYMPIAN

Holding a gunnysack full of uprooted marijuana plants, one detective joked Thursday that it was a "cannabis Christmas."

- It was a triumphant morning for detectives with Thurston County's Narcotics Task Force, who yanked 2,000 plants from the ground in a large-scale pot farm in Capitol Forest near Rock Candy Mountain.

Weeks of investigation culminated in Thursday's bust, which also netted arrests of three men at a home in Winlock. Detectives from several agencies worked together, spying on the suspects as they hiked into the woods to check on their valuable crop.

The operation was fairly sophisticated and one of the larger busts in the Capitol Forest.

Investigators said they think the pot farm was managed by people working for larger drug--trafficking organizations based in central California. It's a trend that officials are seeing more of in isolated areas in West Coast states.

Massive operations recently shut down in central Washington were linked to Mexican criminal organizations. A recent USA Today story detailed how Mexican drug-trafficking organizations are spreading their operations north due to tighter controls on border security.

Detectives found 14 pounds of "processed" marijuana delivered from California in the suspects' home, said Sgt. Fred Bjornberg, of the drug task force. They were booked into the Grays Harbor County Jail.

"It's becoming more and more the case. Usually in the past, it's been local people that do the grows up in the Thules. But more and more it's turning into organized groups," he said. "Maybe they're trying us out. Maybe they're testing the waters to see if they can get away with it up here."

The entire crop could have yielded 300 pounds, worth about \$300,000, Bjornberg said.

The investigation started late in the summer with a tip to the Grays Harbor County Sheriff's Office, which flew over and found the site. Using global positioning satellite coordinates, officers determined the illicit garden was in Thurston County, and turned the case over to local authorities.

Since then, detectives from both counties have alternated shifts monitoring the spots, about a mile down a steep slope off a logging road.

About a dozen investigators in camouflage and hiking gear converged on the spot Thursday morning, deciding to eradicate it before the start of hunting season, when more people would be out in the woods. Several agencies, including the Grays Harbor County Sheriff's Office, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the National Guard participated in the investigation.

"This is outdoor marijuana growing season," said Lt. Loreli Thompson, drug task force commander.

The plants were spread out between two plots about 1 mile apart. They were interspersed with ferns and small pine trees along a tangled network of trails extending a hundred yards in several directions, Thurston County Detective Dale Elliott said.

The growers used long strands of rubber piping to irrigate, taking water from two nearby streams. They hauled in fertilizer, pesticides, and wrapped mesh netting around the perimeter to keep deer out, he said.

Most of the plants had grown 3 to 6 feet tall.

Some pot farms are booby-trapped. This one had tape from a cassette stretched around the area to snag someone and alert growers if the crop were disturbed.

Every year, officials hover over the state forest in a helicopter operated by the sheriff's office or National Guard, searching for more plots of marijuana.

Growers often scour private or public lands for spots that aren't easily reached, yet have access to water and sunlight.

"It's like a petunia, you plant them in the spring and by the first part of October, they'll be ready to harvest," Bjornberg said.

The plant's green color doesn't match native trees and brush, making it easier to spot than one would think, detectives said.

"They look like little green snowballs, once you've seen them a couple of times. They're like little snowballs or little green BB's," Elliott said.

But detectives know there are more they don't see.

"We'll fly over next year and see if we can find some more," he said.

On Thursday, detectives ripped the plants out of the ground, leaving small holes. Other times, they'll cut them down with machetes. It all depends on how the case is prosecuted, detectives said.

They expected Thursday's case to be handled in federal court, Bjornberg said. Federal cases usually involve larger quantities and the feds require detectives to count the evidence by the root ball.

Cloudy weather was a setback in Thursday's operation. It grounded the sheriff's helicopter, which detectives planned to use to hoist out the evidence. Without a "bird," they had to haul the heavy sacks of pot 1 mile back to the road.

As detectives marched the bright green plants back up the hill, a pungent, skunky odor stuck to the morning air.

Left behind was the litter that still needed to be removed: bags of fertilizer, plastic cups, piping, string and other garbage. Detectives promised all would be collected.

Despite the strenuous activity, detectives didn't seem to mind a little gardening.

"Every day is different," Elliott said. "Yesterday we were up in Tacoma on a drug deal with methamphetamine. Today, we're out here pulling out plants."

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