

JOINT FORCES

Local cops take war on illicit pot-growing into their own hands – with machetes

By Erik German





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A Fresno County sheriff's officer, Lt. Richard Ko, examines pot plants in a field in Sanger, Calif. They were later removed. Gary Kazanjian/AP

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war on illicit pot-growing in hands - with machetes

By Erik German



UKIAH, Calif. — The armed, camouflaged men dangling under helicopters may look like commandos, but they're actually local cops, fighting a newly aggressive front in America's drug war.

These officers from the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office and other agencies teamed up on a recent morning to raid an illegal marijuana farm that even staunch backers of Northern California's pot industry say they can't tolerate. The growers behind the operation, spotted from the air beforehand, had chosen to plant weed on a rugged patch of back country that doesn't belong to them.

The officers landed on a thickly forested mountainside, and fanned out with machetes in hand, hacking down every green marijuana bush they found. The day's haul would amount to more than 10,000 plants with a value of \$2 million.



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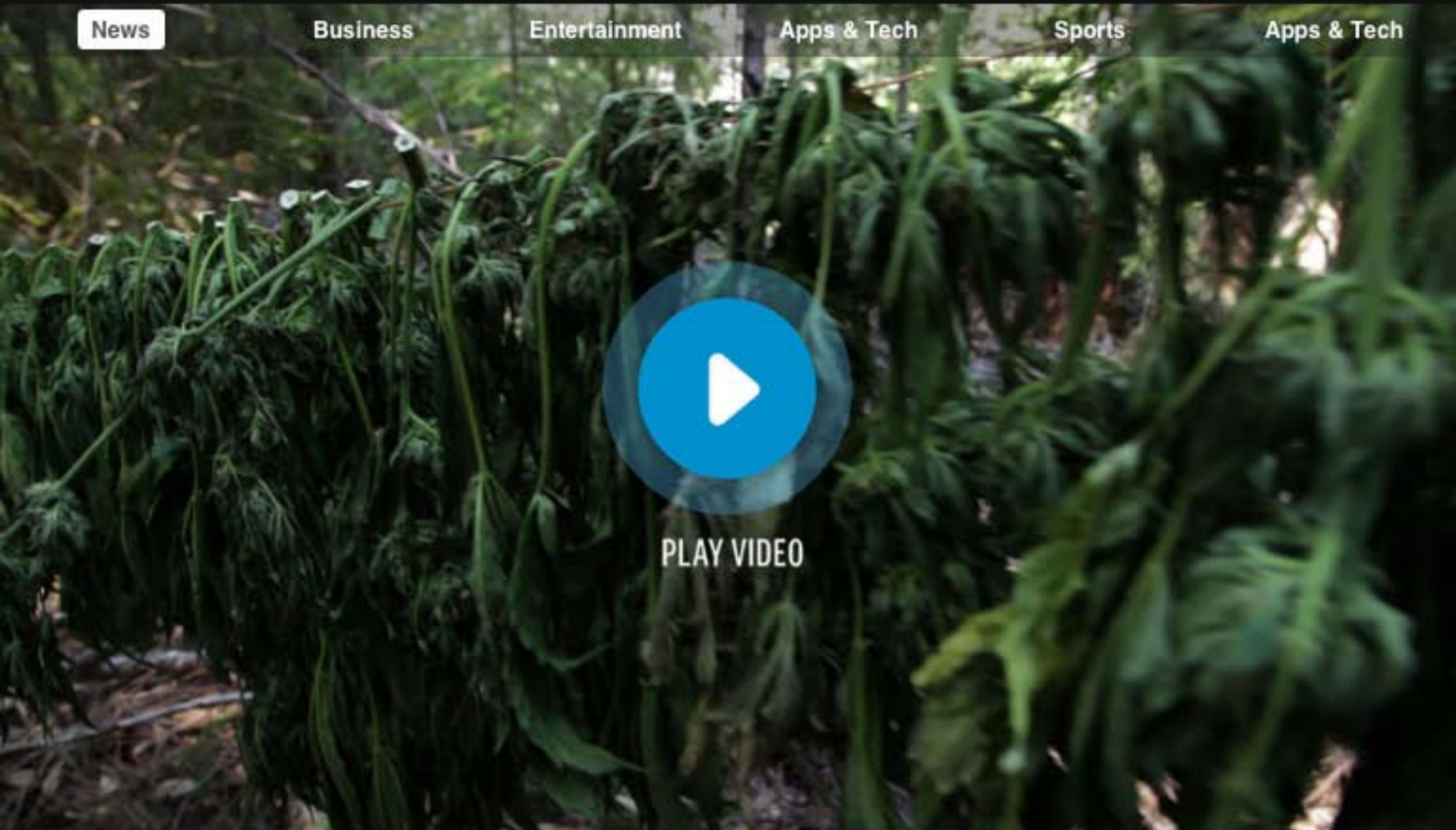
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PLAY VIDEO

Video by Erik German, Vivek Kemp and Jonathan Tortora

“Stay with us,” the team leader, Bruce Smith, cautioned an embedded reporter from The Daily. “We’ve been shot at a few times before.”

Clandestine weed operations like this are taking root in remote national forests and timber tracts across the American West — driven as much by the lucrative weed market as the Obama administration’s crackdowns on openly farmed pot. Authorities say that illegal back-country cultivation is not only a major criminal racket, it also poses a threat to any hikers or hunters unlucky enough to stumble across the crops. The growers, police say, can be jumpy and heavily armed.

In his office before the raid, Smith held up an SKS assault rifle, rusty and missing its stock, which he’d seized from trespassing growers during an operation this summer. “It’s a piece of s***,” Smith said. “But it’ll kill you.”

Last month, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration concluded a four-week marijuana

eradication campaign on public lands in seven Western states, seizing 578,000 plants worth well over \$1 billion. More than 80 percent of the plants came from California, and a good many of those from Mendocino County.

Mendocino’s 3,500 square miles of redwoods and rolling hills make up one corner of California’s so-called Emerald Triangle. The region, which also includes Humboldt and Trinity counties, takes its name from the potent weed that’s been cultivated here since the 1960s. Since California partially legalized marijuana for medical use in 1996, pot farming here has sharply escalated — as has the war on illegal growers.

“We have old hippies in our county growing marijuana and they are not our problem,” Mendocino’s sheriff, Tom Allman, told The Daily. The problem, he said, comes from a new, criminal class of growers pouring in from out of state.

“These are people who are trying to get rich quick,” Allman said. “Mendocino County was basically being taken over by thugs.”

“They don’t care about our water, they don’t care about our dirt and they don’t care about offending anybody.” – Mendocino Sheriff Tom Allman, about illegal pot growers

Allman’s office once issued medicinal growers permits to cultivate as many as 99 plants per legal parcel of land. Under pressure from federal prosecutors in January, county officials dropped the limit to a less conspicuous 25 plants. Raising any marijuana remains a federal crime, and asset forfeiture laws have long allowed police to seize growers’ homes and land in drug raids.

All of which has created an incentive for illegal cultivators to find well-watered, south-facing slopes deep in Mendocino’s unpatrolled back country and raise marijuana there. Since hiding is the essence of the game, reliable crop numbers are hard to come by. But Allman estimates the 632,000 plants authorities eradicated in the county last year only represent about one-tenth of the total amount of pot under cultivation. That would mean Mendocino growers are raising something like 6 million plants on the sly.

Police say these unregulated, makeshift gardens leave hillsides gullied by rains, which wash fertilizer and pesticides into backcountry streams. Rotating crews of growers live beside the plots full-time, and, after harvest, they leave the woods littered with tons of trash. Allman said the county hauled more than 50,000 pounds of garbage from last year’s raids.

“They don’t care about our water, they don’t care about our dirt and they don’t care about

offending anybody,” he said.

Accidentally crossing paths with growers has become an increasingly dangerous possibility for anyone entering Mendocino’s forests. Last year, sheriff’s deputies killed two growers in shootouts during raids on illegal pot farms. In 2006, two members of an Indian tribe were shot to death after stumbling across a marijuana garden cultivated by growers trespassing on the tribe’s reservation. The problem gathered a head of political steam in August 2010, when several county residents, fresh off frightening encounters in the woods, confronted the sheriff at a public meeting.

“Out of the 11 citizens that spoke, seven of them said, ‘I’ve been shot at while recreating in the national forest,’ ” Allman recalled. “And every time somebody said that, all eyes were on me.”

Stepping up aerial pot raids, he said, has been



his answer. So far, rumors that trespassing growers represent an organized incursion by Mexican drug cartels have proven unfounded, Allman said. Of the 115 growers arrested in raids last year, he said not even one in five were Mexican nationals. Most, he said, were “very low-income white people who were trying to make their million.”

The promise of big paydays has woven itself into the rhythm of life here. “During harvest season, the population of the county all but quadruples,” said Matthew Frank, 35, a former grower whose recent book “Pot Farm” details his time working on an undisclosed medicinal marijuana operation in Mendocino.

Field laborers he knew cleared as much as \$25,000 each in a four-month season, Frank said, and the landowner was rumored to be raking in millions.

Because there’s likely even more money coming out of trespass gardens, some Mendocino officials say illegal production isn’t likely to drop in the face of sporadic military-style raids.

“They’re futile,” said Dan Hamburg, a proponent of marijuana legalization who serves on the county’s board of supervisors. “Maybe if you put the resources into Mendocino County that they’re putting into Helmand Province in Afghanistan, maybe they could make a dent. But we don’t have the money.”

Hamburg said he dislikes trespass gardens as much as anyone, and he doesn’t fault Sheriff Allman for taking them down. Like most elected



Sheriff's officers in Mendocino County, Calif., prepare to raid illegal marijuana farms.

officials here, Hamburg and Allman walk a fine line between voters in the quasi-legal marijuana industry and those who’ve become sick of the mess in the woods.

“His job is to enforce the law,” Hamburg said. “And the law is absurd.”

Allman said he doesn’t see it that way.

“I think it’s very important that we throw our flag in the sand,” he said. Allman said he sees himself as part of a campaign to teach the industry that some forms of marijuana cultivation will never be legal.

Asked about the amount of military hardware involved in such education, Allman laughed. “A highly aggressive, very expensive education campaign,” he said. ■

Erik.German@thedaily.com