

**STATEMENT
OF
CONG. MIKE THOMPSON
CALIFORNIA'S 1ST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL

DECEMBER 7, 2011**

Thank you Chairwoman Feinstein and Co-Chairman Grassley for holding today's hearing on such an important issue to my Congressional District and to my home state of California.

And thank you for extending me the opportunity to testify in front of your caucus today – I have been working on this issue for many years, partnering with the great leadership of Chairwoman Feinstein, and am encouraged by the increased attention that this national emergency is receiving.

Notwithstanding this focus; improved enforcement and eradication funding; and more coordinated efforts across federal, state and local authorities; our public and private lands across California, and throughout the country, are being held hostage by illegal drug growers.

In short, our public lands have been taken away from us. That is wrong, and must be stopped.

Last year, more than 3 million marijuana plants were eradicated from 62 National Forests. The effect of these illegal drug grows has been profound: leading to unacceptable levels of violence and the devastation of our environment and natural resources.

On August 27 of this year, my close friend, Fort Bragg City Councilman Jere Melo was murdered while investigating a report of illegal drug growing activity on timber property that he managed on the North Coast of California.

This escalating problem is putting Californians at risk. Today, the public is faced with using our forests under threat of armed confrontation. We have come to the point where the US Forest Service has locally issued a printed “Be Safe” warning to people going into the Mendocino National Forest with specific instructions on “what to do if you encounter a marijuana growing site.”

Law enforcement agents in northern California have also been compelled to use lethal force to defend themselves while surveying

public land. During a seven week period of 2010, agents killed five suspected marijuana growers in Mendocino, Lake, Napa, and Santa Clara counties.

Meanwhile, timber companies report that they have been increasingly forced to eradicate illegal drugs grows, many times protected by armed gunmen, from their privately held forest lands as marijuana cultivation has spread.

Over the last five years, Green Diamond Timber Company, which has large land holdings in both California and Washington, has discovered an average of 30 marijuana gardens per year on their managed land. A single grow site they discovered in 2008 contained more than 135,000 marijuana plants.

Aside from the direct threat of violence to those who want to work, recreate, hunt on, or simply enjoy our public lands, these marijuana growing operations are destroying our environment.

The chemical contamination; alteration of watersheds; diversion of natural water courses; dewatering of streams; leaching of dangerous chemicals into our water supply; elimination of native vegetation; wildfire hazards; and the harmful disposal of non-biodegradable material

are degrading our natural resources with far more intensity than we could ever clean up.

In many cases, the damage is being done to the same watersheds where millions of federal and state restoration dollars have already been invested to improve conditions for threatened fish and wildlife species.

Recently, multi-county, multi-agency operations have been deployed to take back our public land, including Operation Full Court Press in the Mendocino National Forest, located in my Congressional District, and Operation Trident in the Sierra Nevada region of California.

The interdiction totals from this summer's three-week Full Court Press Operation were significant.

During this operation, law enforcement confiscated 38 weapons, seized 1986 pounds of processed marijuana valued at more than \$800 million, eradicated more than 600,000 marijuana plants and made 159 arrests.

Less publicized, and even more concerning however, were the 5,400 pounds of fertilizer, 260 pounds of pesticides, 40 miles of plastic irrigation pipe, 80 propane tanks, and 26 TONS of trash that authorities confiscated during this single three week operation.

These totals are just a drop in the bucket of what is ending up in our creeks and waterways across the country.

Since being elected to the United States Congress, and during my time in the California State Senate, I have partnered with Chairwoman Feinstein to take back our public lands.

Two and a half years ago, I convened representatives from local, state and federal law enforcement in northern California to start planning greater regional coordination on this effort.

And last year, I hosted a major public lands coordination meeting in Washington DC, involving federal land management agencies and federal law enforcement, to further facilitate the creation of a renewed and effective national strategy to end this critical problem.

Thanks to the hard work of Chairwoman Feinstein, coordination and funding through the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Program has focused additional resources to those areas of the country where the problems we are discussing today are most concentrated.

And I believe that our collective efforts are starting to pay off

Recently, we saw the elevation of marijuana eradication on public land as a higher priority within the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

And ONDCP Director Kerlikowske, who is here with us today, will be able to speak with great authority to how the public lands committee his office established within his agency, has started focusing the attention and resources this epidemic needs to be confronted with.

However, I believe that work remains to be done to take our forests back.

First, we need to make sure that our national public lands strategy prioritizes investigations and enforcement as much as it focuses on marijuana plant eradication.

Investigations ending with effective prosecutions, coupled with aggressive civil and criminal forfeiture proceedings must be part of our solution if we are to be effective

Second, I believe that our law enforcement and intelligence communities must have a coordinated strategy to take our forests back from increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking organizations.

Chairwoman Feinstein and I have been able to work together on a provision in the draft FY2012 Intelligence Authorization Act that will help.

This provision would require the Director of National Intelligence to submit a detailed threat assessment to Congress examining and ultimately enhancing the ability of law enforcement, the intelligence community, and all federal land management agencies to collectively gather, process, and share critical intelligence information regarding the suspected presence of foreign drug traffickers on our public lands.

Finally, the Administration must continue to make the financial commitment that ensures federal land management agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the Forest Service, have the resources they need to truly confront this issue.

Because of the fiscal pressures we face here in Washington, DC and in state capitols across the country, difficult decisions will need to be made in the coming months about how we best spend the limited resources we have available to confront this national emergency.

However, one thing is clear: now is not the time to slow down or scale back the progress we have made. Put simply, we must maintain our commitment to taking back our public lands.

Again, thank you Chairwoman Feinstein and Chairman Grassley for holding today's hearing on such an important issue and for providing me the opportunity to testify.

I stand ready to take our forests back and look forward to working with the members of this Caucus; federal land management agencies; federal, state, and local law enforcement; and those here today, to make this a reality.

Thank you.