

In wake of crackdown, Supes look for new ways to pay the bill



Yolo County Sheriff Ed Prieto and Undersheriff Tom Lopez gave details on their recent raids of illegal cannabis grows. HANS PETER — DAILY DEMOCRAT

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The numbers prove it: after nine raids, 13 arrests and the destruction of \$15 million in mature cannabis, Sheriff Ed Prieto meant what he said about “eradicating” illegal grows. But in the wake of the first wave of raids, Yolo County must now face the bill.

Prieto and Undersheriff Tom Lopez presented their efforts to county supervisors on Tuesday, noting that even after nine raids, there were “several more in the queue.”

ADVERTISING

The nine searches took place in rural areas of the county, namely the Capay Valley, Dunnigan and Zamora. In addition to a total of 5,325 cannabis plants, Sheriff’s deputies also found firearms in the possession of felons, other guns and ammo, and large sums of cash.

Prieto announced his intentions to target illegal grows in August to some disbelief among Yoloans, but he and his deputies have since proven their vigilance.

“We’re going to remain steadfast on this,” Prieto told supervisors. “We want to make it clear that (illegal growers) need to stop or move out of the county.”

Lopez said that the nine raids uncovered large-scale grows operated mainly by people who did not live within Yolo County. Many of the arrested individuals reside in Sacramento or beyond. Yet more concerning, many of the individuals are convicted felons with access to firearms. The evidence suggests the illegal grow business is booming locally.

Noting the “queue” of raids to come, Lopez said the only thing slowing deputies down is the back-end work.

“We’re catching up on reports,” he said. “There will also be highs and lows based on the grow season.”

This time of year marks the harvest season of the plant, and the cannabis discovered in raids was ready for drying and trimming.

“We’ve been taking down some big plants,” Lopez said. “And (Task Force members) say it’s some of the best marijuana they’ve ever seen.”

The harvest season also means increased security among legal and illegal grows alike. Half joking, Lopez said they’ve added garden shears to the list of suspicious “burglary tools.”

FOOTING THE BILL

But in the wake of these honed efforts, the county must now face the cost of taking down illegal grows.

Supervisors support the crackdown, as illegal grows undercut legal operations and weigh down the county’s ability to create fair cultivation policy.

Supervisors commended the sheriff for his department’s iron fist, but amid thanks and praise, County Counsel Phil Pogledich mentioned that many of the raid costs will come out of the county coffers.

“Most of that enforcement won’t be reimbursed,” he said, spinning the conversation into another direction — draining funds out of illegal growers.

Though deputies yanked nearly \$15 million in cannabis, all of it was destroyed. Even if the county kept the plants — a public relations mess — their predicted value would be impossible to liquidate. Cash and guns received during the raids also have red tape attached.

Supervisors came up with a few ways to break even.

“We need to tie these (crimes) to the land,” said District 5 Supervisor Duane Chamberlain.

Chamberlain suggested that idea during a board meeting a few months ago, when enforcement policy was still earning stripes. The idea of treating the grow property as an asset could mean more avenues for funding raids.

Pogledich said that in light of the Land Use process and needed permits, the county could place a lien on illegal grow sites based on the cost of the raid itself.

“The county could recover some of the costs that way,” he said.

District 4 Supervisor Jim Provenza added that in light of a legal process, the District Attorney’s Office could also charge law breakers with unfair business practices. In turn, this would charge the offender with the cost of attorneys. The suggested marked the seriousness of Provenza and his colleagues.

“I don’t want to compete with the black market,” he said. “I want to eliminate the black market.”

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