INTRODUCTION:
Previous security alerts have been written on the hazards of marijuana cultivation on public and timber industry lands, but few, if any, have discussed the specifics of drug cartels operating on these same lands. Drug cartels (primarily Hispanic and Asian) are a significant problem in the Western states. During the past several years, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service officials have reported encountering large-scale marijuana cultivation operations in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah and Arizona. These operations are well-funded and often guarded by armed individuals who live in camps around their marijuana gardens.

It is now evident that the South is not immune to these groups. During the past three years, three large marijuana gardens operated by Mexican nationals have been located in western and central Arkansas. There are strong indications that these drug cartel operations are spreading to other Southern states as well.

SECURITY BREACH/DAMAGE:
U.S. Forest Service agents in the Western states report that most of the groups they encounter are heavily armed, and there have been shootouts with group members as agents approach their marijuana gardens. Arrests were made on two of the three incidents in Arkansas, and firearms were recovered at each site. During the summer of 2003, a large marijuana garden with over 7,000 plants was discovered by a U.S. Forest Service aerial observer in western Arkansas. A surveillance team was put on the garden, and the team apprehended three Mexican nationals while they were tending the garden. Two other suspects escaped.

One week later, officials found one of the suspects dead from an apparent homicide. It is thought that he was executed by the drug cartel leadership because they believed he had provided information to law enforcement officials. These drug cartels are very dangerous. Many of the Mexican national workers are fearful of their cartel leadership. Generally, these workers are deported back to Mexico upon arrest, but may return later to the United States to work in other parts of the country.

There can also be significant resource damage found at these garden locations from their cultivation activities. Irrigation systems are not uncommon and the use of fertilizers, insecticides and other chemicals may leach into the streams.

Many of these individuals may live in tents or shelters on-site, and the sanitary conditions are poor at best.

RECOGNITION:
Be aware that these types of operations are now occurring in the South and may be occurring on your lands. These marijuana gardens will generally be different from other typical marijuana gardens you may find in the South. The grow sites may be as large as a couple of acres and cleared of all brush. Unlike most marijuana gardens in the South, the number of plants will typically exceed 1,000, and gardens are actively tended. You may find signs of living quarters and well beaten paths around the grow sites. Suppliers will often deliver food and supplies to these workers on a routine basis, so be aware of unusual vehicle traffic. Lookouts are often posted in order to alert co-workers to the presence of others. Many of the cultivation sites are found in untypical locations and are often great distances from any roads or trails. The location in western Arkansas was found near the top of a mountain.

ACTIONS TAKEN:
The U.S. Forest Service has taken a very aggressive approach in identifying cultivation sites and taking actions to apprehend violators. The use of aerial observers has been the primary tool to locate these sites. However, employees and the public often recognize and report unusual activity in remote or isolated areas that provide clues to this activity. The Forest Service has provided safety talks to all employees on the dangers of this activity. Reports from employees and the public are followed up, and appropriate law enforcement actions are taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
Provide your field personnel with awareness training to alert them to this type of activity. Advise them to avoid walking into areas where there are indications of cultivation activity and to report any unusual activity to law enforcement officials. Spread the word about this potential hazard on your timberlands. Be safe.

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