MARIJUANA GARDENS AND METH LAB DUMP SITES: PREPAREDNESS

Timber Security: illegal substances

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BACKGROUND: Drug cartels are increasingly operating in rural forested lands—primarily growing marijuana or cooking meth. For the past several years, foresters and loggers have only occasionally encountered an individual watching over a marijuana garden (known as a “grow”), or come across a small meth lab dump site. However, as these activities become more organized and larger in volume, the risk of violent encounters or toxic exposure becomes a serious concern and liability. Personnel working in the woods should consider the following.

FIVE ELEMENTS IN A SECURITY PLAN FOR WORKING IN THE WOODS

1. Know who to call (with phone numbers) if encountering emergencies or unusual situations.
2. Always make sure someone knows the area where you are working, either based on road systems or GPS.
3. Have a mental picture of marijuana plants and typical grow layout in the forest (see figures).
4. Remember that dump sites should be considered toxic unless proven otherwise.
5. Carry Suspicious Vehicle Forms (See FRA Security Alert 02-Q-3)

TEN THINGS TO LOOK FOR:

- Large marijuana grows often have irrigation paraphernalia scattered about, large quantities of poison containers to kill rodents, or fertilizer sacks.
- Unauthorized use of heliponds, or water sources reserved for legitimate wildfire fighting needs.
- Watch specifically for unusual activity on steep slopes with southern exposures.
- Check reforested sites, the first season after an herbicide application and at the normal recheck 3-4 years later (to make sure stocking levels have been met); that period is the ideal time for growing marijuana, since competition from other vegetation is low, and sunlight is ample.
- People carrying irrigation or PVC pipe.
- Diverted streams.
- Concentration of human defecation/latrine use.
- Tents or camps showing long-term use.
• Tree sits showing recent long-term activity—particularly out of hunting season.
• A concentration of girdled or damaged trees that results in additional sunlight.

**IF YOU ENCOUNTER A GARDEN OR DUMP SITE, FOUR THINGS TO DO NEXT:**

- If you are carrying a GPS unit, take a reading, or if not, clearly identify location of garden or
dump by the road system. (Take the reading or write notes after you have moved safely away
from the immediate location!)
- Notify your employer, as well as your local law
enforcement, as soon as possible and provide as
much information as you can at the time.
- *Regarding marijuana gardens:* Leave the area
immediately to avoid encountering those
responsible for, or guarding, the garden. DO
NOT attempt to locate the persons yourself!
They can be violent if confronted.
- *Regarding meth lab dumps:* If you are exposed
to any of these chemicals, or if you feel ill, seek
medical attention as soon as possible.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Deliberate “safety and security awareness” training programs are needed to
minimize these increasingly serious situations. FRA has presented additional information on
recognition and awareness of meth labs and marijuana gardens in Security 04-Q-1, 04-Q-6, and
04-Q-7.

*Western Forest & Fiber Security Group Program members:*
Dan Waite, Weyerhaeuser
Denny Mohan, Longview Fibre
Mike Dykzeul, Oregon Forest Industries Council
Clay Brown, Coast Forest Products Association
Chuck Karl, Oregon HIDTA

*Reviewed by*
Tim Gammell,
Western Region Manager