



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

This marijuana haul last year was one of many CAMP raids in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

## DRUGS Local pot-growing more risky

By JOHN ROBINSON  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — County programs to eradicate marijuana plants seem to be succeeding, although the marijuana trade continues to flourish in Santa Cruz.

Both marijuana growers and agents from the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting say that the program has had a major impact on marijuana growing. But they also say that the problem is not going away.

Sitting on a mountainside in a clandestine marijuana garden, a

grower dreams of money while listening for the helicopters or snapping twigs that might announce a raid.

"I just want (the crop) to come in," the grower says. "It's not that easy anymore. It's not relaxing. It doesn't cut it with a family. You eventually either quit or get busted."

The grower is sitting near a dozen plants that he estimates might be worth \$12,000 to \$15,000 — if they are harvested.

At the County Building, Sheriff's Sgt. Ken Oaks, the local coordinator of the Campaign Against

Marijuana Planting, is plotting strategy. In a few days the CAMP team will return to Santa Cruz for a final two-month attack on marijuana growing, and Oaks, armed with aerial photographs and search warrants, is planning to raid dozens of marijuana gardens.

"It's a race between us and the growers," Oaks said. "I know that in Santa Cruz we have made a major impact on rural growing."

This year CAMP has confiscated about 3,000 plants and expects that number to increase to nearly 11,000 plants over the next two months.

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## Pot/ A changing enterprise

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The numbers are less than CAMP racked up several years ago due to the fact that there are fewer large marijuana gardens being cultivated.

"We are finding more gardens, but a smaller number of plants," Oaks said. The average marijuana plot has less than 20 plants, far less than a few years ago when agents routinely found cultivations with hundreds of plants.

"We fly the heck out of the county," Oaks said. "You are never going to see big marijuana plantations in Santa Cruz."

"If I find even one plant and get back to it to make an arrest, an arrest will be made," Oaks said.

CAMP officers regularly fly over the county, spotting and photographing marijuana plantations, using a LORAN navigation system that pinpoints their location for later raids.

The grower, who said he has been growing for the past five years with mixed success, agreed that CAMP has been effective.

"They are pretty efficient," the grower said. "I hate CAMP. I'm

scared and I never used to be scared.... You have to really be on it to come in now. You have to be small and you can't have anything showing."

The grower described his patch as typical, with several small groupings of plants spread across a mountainside.

The grower would not say how many plants he had. It takes an hour's hike through a bewildering maze of trails and forest and several crawls through poison oak tunnels to reach the plants.

The grower said he pumps his water from a stream with a battery-powered pump into a reservoir made of plastic and wire close to a half mile away.

"If everything goes right, it's pretty easy," he said. "I'm just hoping to make \$10,000 to \$20,000 that I can parlay into a legitimate business. I should have done it years ago but I was too busy having fun. I am into working and I want to get away from it (marijuana growing)."

The money keeps him in the business, he said. Top grade marijuana currently sells for \$3,800 a pound,

he said.

"Somebody is going to grow it," he said. "It's the modern day gold rush. It's just tougher to find a vein now. But the tougher they (CAMP) make it, the more prices go up."

Oaks is under no illusion that CAMP will completely eradicate marijuana growing.

"It's not going to go away," he said. "We find it everywhere. I flew over the central county the other day and everywhere I looked there was marijuana."

Pot growing also harms the environment.

"These guys don't give a (damn) about the environment," Oaks said. "They dam up streams and dump their fertilizer right in it. There are always poisons around and rat traps."

Oaks has even found an electric fence around one plot as well as booby traps of nail-studded spikes and fishline with dangling hooks.

"I get phone calls all the time from property owners who say they've been told not to leave the main trails or roads during harvest time," Oaks said.