

Dispute to resume over details of pot busts

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Are Santa Cruz County narcotics agents busting big-time pot dealers or people who possess marijuana for personal or even for medical use?

That debate will be renewed today as the board of supervisors receives its update on how sheriff's drug enforcement officers spent \$15,000 in state funds earmarked for marijuana eradication last year. That allocation was approved only after supervisors approved a mission statement that called for spending the money to arrest major pot growers, not people growing the illegal weed solely for personal or medical use.

According to statistics released by the sheriff and the county administrative office, the state funds were used to pay for investigations of 89 cases of marijuana cultivation. Of those cases, 53 — or 60 percent — involved commercial pot-growing operations.

"The department's criteria for commercial growing," notes County Administrator Susan Mauriello, "is cultivations of 10 or more plants, a significantly higher number than other jurisdictions involved" in the state's marijuana eradication program.

In the other 36 cases, Mauriello said, the sheriff says that no arrests were made in 16 instances and 20 cases involving fewer than 10 plants were situations "spotted from the air" where "the exact number of plants were not ascertained until officers were sent to search on the ground."

But activists favoring legalization of marijuana for personal or medical use dispute the county's figures.

"The statistics regarding the expenditure of state CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Planting) funds show that 62 percent of the money was spent in cases involving less than 10 plants," said activist Theodora Kerry.