

# GROWING UP

Certification standards for medical marijuana gaining steam



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

Two workers plant cannabis for marijuana cultivation at a growing operation in the mountains surrounding Soquel on Wednesday afternoon. Some locals are trying to implement an accreditation program that assures health and safety measures for marijuana.

Drugs

By JASON HOPPIN

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✓ CAPITOLA — Santa Cruz has long established its bonafides when it comes to organic farming. But a nascent effort now on the horizon could lead to a new title: the birthplace of certified marijuana.

Clearly echoing the organic movement of the 1970s, a handful of county leaders and responsible-minded medical marijuana growers and dispensary operators are formulating a set of standards that set a new bar for best practices and quality standards for pot. Even county farming officials are lending their expertise.

"Just like the food industry, you're going to have Safeway dispensaries and Costco dispensaries. And you're going to have New Leaf dispensaries," said Colin Disheroon, operator of Santa Cruz Mountain Naturals, who is expanding his offerings of responsibly grown medical pot. "And that's kind of our goal, to take it to the New Leaf step of things."

Seen foremost as a way to comply with new county rules on marijuana cultivation, the certification program could represent a significant leap forward in early efforts to come up with standards in what remains a legally gray industry, but one taking cautious yet clear steps toward legitimacy by seeking government regulations.

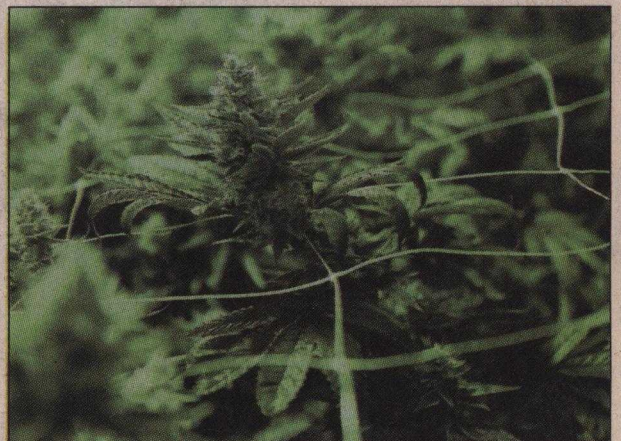
## BUDDING IDEA

The idea was first brought forward, officially at least, by Santa Cruz County Supervisor John Leopold. With new county rules for dispensary operators and medical marijuana growers, Leopold proposed third-party certification as a way for people to show compliance with those rules.

But with legal prohibitions falling and public sup-

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Dozens of cannabis plants sit underneath dim green lights at a growing operation in Soquel on Wednesday.





Cannabis plants sit inside of an indoor grow room in Soquel on Wednesday.

KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

## POT

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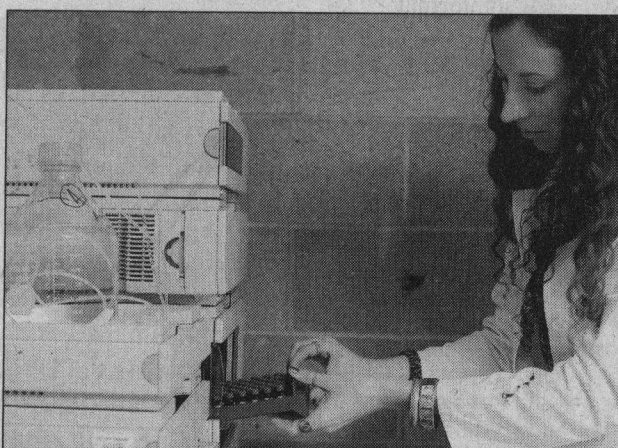
port up for even recreation use nationwide — Colorado legalized pot Jan. 1, and Washington state will soon follow suit — supporters of the idea say there's no reason a certification program started here couldn't have national reach.

"I really think we're at a point in the industry where it's like cannabis 2.0," said Ian Rice, sales director at SC Laboratories, a Capitola cannabis testing company with 1,200 clients nationwide. "From people involved to the consumers themselves, the industry's really matured a lot."

While marijuana isn't recognized by the federal government as an agricultural crop, some form of organic-like certification is available from companies like Crescent City-based Clean Green Certification.

The Santa Cruz version likely would feature legal checks, including zoning and code-compliance verifications, which can be especially important when it comes to electrical systems, a potential fire threat.

But one significant aspect of the idea could be developing a regime of standards for how marijuana is grown. Some unregulated pot farms can have devastating environmental impacts, and consumers are often in the dark when it comes to everything from marijuana potency to what chemicals were used to



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**Microbiologist and lab supervisor Jaclyn Mauser tests the THC content of marijuana samples at Santa Cruz Labs on Wednesday.**

grow the crop.

"I think this industry's getting away from the point where it's just easy money, the money comes pouring in, don't worry about anything," said Josh Wurzer, lab director and co-founder of SC Laboratories. "Dump your water wherever, use diesel generators to power your grow operation. ... It's getting to the point where you have to be on your game, you have to be good and efficient and do things the right way to compete. And that's the way it should be."

### BUSINESS NECESSITY

Some dispensaries still buy pot from what, for all intents and purposes, are mom and pop operations that peddle their product door-to-door. Certification can cost several thousands dollars, but supporters of the idea point out that the figure is less than the monthly electrical bill for many home growers.

Trying to get away from the uncertainties inherent in that kind of supply chain, Disheroon, who originally moved to Santa Cruz to go to work for Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center, is trying to develop his own pot production operation, and in the process lower his overhead costs. It's not only the right thing to do, he said, but it makes good business sense.

At his Soquel farm, Disheroon nurtures several varieties, including one high in cannabidiol and low in THC. Such strains don't produce a marijuana "high" but have been used to effectively treat several medical conditions, including life-threatening seizures. He uses recycled water to feed his crops and can control his heating and lighting systems from his smartphone.

Disheroon and others involved in the Santa Cruz medical marijuana trade look

forward to a day when the industry matures and gains broad acceptance, including with banks, government officials and insurers. Already, some companies are starting to offer crop insurance, he said.

"My guess is that if this thing goes full-steam ahead legal, we're going to have insurance companies wanting some sort of certification or they're not going to want to insure a crop, or a dispensary," Disheroon said.

Three-year-old SC Laboratories is clearly positioning itself as a certifier, though it is likely that several organizations could offer the service once a set of standards are agreed upon. There is no deadline for finalizing standards, but things seem to be developing quickly.

Marijuana is still illegal under federal law, and two years ago federal authorities cracked down on several operations statewide. One common theme seemed to be the profit motive — where it looked like medical pot was becoming more about getting rich than therapy, the feds seemed to step in. Certification could help keep them at bay.

"When they're satisfied that good regulations are in place, they seem to leave people alone, and Santa Cruz has been left alone," said Ben Rice, a local attorney who works with dispensaries. "Hopefully, that will continue to be the case."

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