

Seizure of pot operations on the decline in California

By Andrew Becker, California Watch

As California's outdoor marijuana growing season nears its end for 2012, drug officials are reporting a sharp decline in crop seizures for the second year in a row.

The latest figures show that local, state and federal law enforcement agencies are on track to eradicate an estimated 1.5 million plants from outdoor gardens – mostly on public land – down from a decade high of about 7.3 million plants in 2009. This year's seizure total would be the lowest since 2004, when a little more than 1.1 million plants were eradicated, according to federal Drug Enforcement Administration statistics.

Some attribute the drop to a federal crackdown on medical marijuana dispensaries and illegal cultivation on public land, along with political losses in California such as the defeat in 2010 of pro-legalization Proposition 19. At the same time, fewer counter-narcotics teams hunted for California pot this year because of the elimination of a 3-decade-old state eradication program.

Others say growers have retreated to smaller plots on private land and gone back underground. They also point to a glut of marijuana that depressed wholesale prices and burst the state's "green rush" to capitalize on relaxed attitudes toward the drug.

Tommy LaNier, director of the National Marijuana Initiative, a program funded by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, said law enforcement officers and agents had a hard time locating marijuana patches this season, even though they spent the same amount of flight time as in years past

searching for plants.

“There’s a significant down trend in cultivation activities,” LaNier said. “There’s been a huge impact because of what we’ve been doing the last six years.”

A confluence of other factors might have contributed to fewer plants this year, including improved intelligence gathering and investigative efforts, more tips about illicit marijuana gardens from the public, and concerted efforts to prosecute growers, LaNier said.

He also highlighted the use of intelligence analysts and informants to find marijuana gardens on public land. The U.S. intelligence community has helped track money that moves across the southern border and people who are entering the United States from Mexico who are involved in cultivation, he said.

While more federal attention has turned toward California’s pot industry, the state’s 28-year-old Campaign Against Marijuana Planting did not operate this year. Funding for the program was slashed in 2011, and Gov. Jerry Brown effectively shuttered the state Department of Justice’s Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, which oversaw the effort and eradication teams in five regions in the state.

In the absence of state funding, a consortium of federal agencies banded together to support the Cannabis Eradication and Reclamation Team, as the new program is known. State Justice Department spokeswoman Michelle Gregory said that as of last week, the program had destroyed 959,144 plants from 215 sites, more than half of which were found on national forestland.

Dale Gieringer, the California coordinator of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said that other than for a brief period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the annual eradication campaign didn’t have a huge effect on

marijuana production. The same might be true of recent efforts, he said.

Growers have improved their techniques to avoid detection, with some turning to smaller patches and even using Google Earth as a tool to help improve concealment, Gieringer said.

“All I can look at are prices and availability on the ground, and I really haven’t seen any impact,” he said.

As law enforcement has squeezed growers on public land, officials have seen them migrate elsewhere, often to where they can exploit the state’s permissive medical marijuana law, officials said.

“There is other stuff that is happening,” said William Ruzzamenti, who directs the federally funded Central Valley High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. “My honest opinion is that there was just as much growing this year as last year. But we’re just not getting it.”

Increasingly, growers are moving out of state, to places such as Nevada, southern Utah, Wisconsin and North Carolina, often growing closer to drug markets, he said.

In California, Ruzzamenti said, there’s been a transition from illicit gardens on public land in the Sierra to the valley floor in Fresno and Tulare counties and remote plots on private land in Northern California, where growers operate “under the pretenses of medical marijuana.”

For years, Trinity County, Humboldt County’s eastern neighbor, has attracted growers because of its sparse population and amenable climate. Local law enforcement says the region has seen a recent explosion in marijuana gardens on private land.

“The number of private grows we have is astronomical. It’s a huge problem,” said Chris Compton, a detective with the Trinity County Sheriff’s Department. “It’s not a secret what

we have going up here.”