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Authorities conduct raid to help Yurok tribe combat illegal pot grows

By LEE ROMNEY
Los Angeles Times

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WEITCHPEC, Calif. -- First, the out-of-state license plates came to the upper reaches of the Yurok Indian Reservation, followed by dump trucks of fertilizer and heavy equipment that punched roads into tribal land.

Runaway marijuana cultivation had made it unsafe to hike, pray, gather medicine and materials for baskets, or prepare sites for ceremonial dances. Chemical runoff and silt harmed the salmon, and rodenticides poisoned the rare Humboldt marten and weasel-like fisher, which the Yurok consider sacred.

This year, as growers siphoned water directly from the streams that feed the Klamath River, persistent menace became imminent crisis: About 200 households that rely entirely on surface water are now at risk of running dry - with no alternative supply.

On Monday, after years of effort, the pleas of Yurok tribal leaders for outside help with eradication were finally answered.

Federal and state agencies launched a massive raid on and around reservation land that is expected to last more than a week and lead to the destruction of an estimated 100,000 marijuana plants.

By early evening, only four of the 43 [search warrants](#) had been served. Yet officers working on properties tucked down miles of dusty, rutted roads had already seized nearly 4,000 plants, stuffing them into a mobile chipper.

Ten people were detained for questioning, one of them armed with a Glock. At one tribal property, three people took off on foot after a [motion sensor](#) triggered at the gate. They left a vehicle with Utah plates and a wallet behind.

"We're doing good," said Yurok Public Safety Chief Leonard Masten. His next target was a property needed for the upcoming Brush Dance, as site preparation for the healing ceremony begin Wednesday.

Operation Yurok came at the request of tribal leaders and is targeting properties in the hills whose springs and creeks feed the Klamath River.

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The first two targets Monday: a site just off the reservation that had already been raided five times with few lasting consequences (officials are hoping to file a federal case this time), and one where the cultivator had blocked access to ceremonial grounds.

Wearing the wide-brimmed hat he never goes without, Yurok Tribal Chairman Thomas O'Rourke turned out early Monday to say thanks at a remote fire station where officers were staging.

"They're stealing millions and millions of gallons of water and it's impacting our ecosystem," he told them. "We can't no longer make it into our dance places, our women and children can't leave the road to gather. We can't hunt. We can't live the life we've lived for thousands of years."

The operation will take down grows "in every direction you can go from here," Lt. George Cavinta of the Humboldt County Sheriff's Drug Task Force promised, gesturing to the rugged hills.

The breakthrough came in April when, thanks to urging from the governor's office, the California National Guard's counterdrug program stepped in and - along with Cavinta's agency - orchestrated the massive raid.

In addition to Yurok police, other participating agencies included the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), the California Department of Justice's North State Marijuana Investigation Team, and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife.

By Monday afternoon, with the raided sites secured, state environmental scientists were tracking irrigation pipe and scouring the hills near a massive community water tank to create a forensic map of just how growers were tapping in.

The crisis, O'Rourke said, was long in building.

Though growers in the region once "brought their fertilizer in batches in the dark," dump trucks now entered reservation land with impunity, he said.

Bald Hills Road, a route of stunning switchbacks that connects the upper reservation to tribal headquarters in Klamath, used to be traveled almost exclusively by tribal members, O'Rourke said. Now, "it's one in 10 that I recognize and every fifth car is an out-of-state plate," he said.

The seriousness of the problem became undeniable last summer, when residents in the hills around the tiny tribal, one-store town of Weitchpec began complaining of plummeting [water pressure](#). Tanks that were full on a Friday would be nearly empty by Monday, Masten said.

When tribal staff surveyed the land from a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter, they were startled at the number of grows.

Then the drought intensified. When the marijuana crop was planted in late spring, community water gauges abruptly swung low once again. And this time, creeks ran dry.

"Streams I've seen in prior years with more severe droughts where water ran, there's no water now," O'Rourke said.

To strengthen its enforcement abilities, the tribal council last fall approved a new controlled substance ordinance that allows authorities to seize cash and items such as vehicles and generators in circumstances where cultivation has harmed the environment. (Proposition 215 - the state medical marijuana law - is not honored by the tribe on reservation land.)

For the Yurok, the damage is multifaceted. Sediment and chemical runoff have suffocated juvenile fish, and warmer, shallower water has triggered an increase in *Ceratomyxa shasta*, a parasite that targets salmon.

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The danger of encroaching on a guarded grow site has made it unwise to visit springs that tribal members have enjoyed for generations. But the infringement on ceremonial dance sites has hit closest to home.

"We are coming close to being prisoners in our own land," O'Rourke said. "Everything we stand for, everything we do is impacted."

On Saturday night, as the raid loomed, he and Masten were among participants in a Brush Dance - a ceremony held for the health and vibrancy of a child. At a village site near the mouth of the river, tribal members entered the dance pit in groups throughout the night as a medicine woman and two helpers tended to a young mother and her infant boy.

After Sunday's sunrise, they donned elaborate regalia passed down for generations: Otter-skin arrow quivers intricately adorned with woodpecker scalps. Dresses of abalone and dentillum shells. Intricately woven basket hats.

The Brush Dance is hosted by family groups and the frequency of the ceremonies has increased in recent years as the tribe reconnects with its language and culture, and more young people participate.

"I think this is not only a strong opportunity to take back our land but to set an example that the tribe has got a zero tolerance policy" toward cultivation, Masten said. "Whether you're an Indian or a non-Indian, you've got to go."

Rose Sylvia, 57, who lives downriver from Weitchpec, agreed that it's time for tribal members to make their voices heard. She went on a trip earlier this year and came home to find an outsider planting a post on her road to put up a gate.

Though her parents always left the house unlocked for any stranger who might be "hungry or thirsty," now that's out of the question. She recently asked her partner for a bittersweet Christmas gift: a gun, to help her feel safer when home alone.

Added Josh Norris, 41, a Yurok tribal member and community organizer: "There are elders living near some of these grows with no telephone and without reliable transportation, and they're scared."

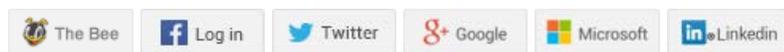
Seeing the law enforcement presence Monday, he said, "it just feels like, wow, somebody finally cares."

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