

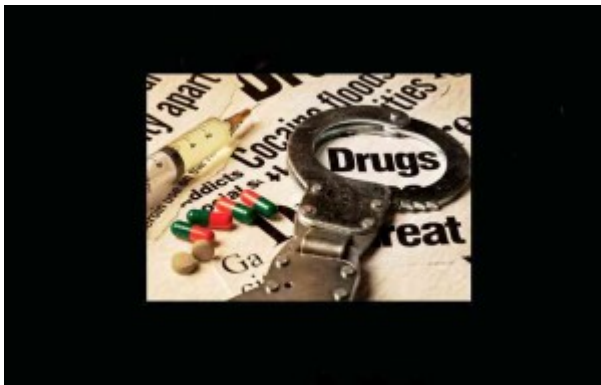
Tahoe drug agents busy with heroin, pot

By Kathryn Reed

Bad guys don't like to commit too many crimes in the winter. Not the obvious ones, any way. Still, narcotics officers on the South Shore are plenty busy.

Indoor grows is one activity that increases in winter. And it's not for medicinal purposes. People are shipping marijuana back and forth from Tahoe.

"We pick off packages full of weed or money," Jeff Catchings told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Catchings is the commander of the South Lake Tahoe El Dorado Narcotics Task Force – or SLEDNET for short.

Working on finding the big dealers is SLEDNET's goal – no matter the drug.

Heroin use is back up after declining for a spell. On the California side of the South Shore there were 26 heroin overdose deaths in an 18-month period starting in November 2010.

"Heroin deaths are higher than vehicle, homicide ... it beats everything," Catchings said. "We do have a drug problem, that is obvious."

SLEDNET has been operating since 1988. It was threatened with

being shutdown a little more than a year ago because of funding. And, still, the agency that is run by the state and staffed with mostly local law enforcement officers remains on unstable ground.

El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini told *Lake Tahoe News* he sees value in the task force and is doing what he can to keep it going.

The state Department of Justice is weighing whether to keep the 27 task forces in California going. June is the latest a decision is expected.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department has two officers in SLEDNET, EDSO one. Catchings is with DOJ.

While the California Highway Patrol is supposed to be part of SLEDNET, it does not currently have an officer assigned to the group. This could change as people go through upcoming academy classes.

Douglas County used to be part of SLEDNET, but with standards between the states changing, those deputies could no longer participate. Alpine County had a member in the past who was funded via a grant.

While those counties are not part of SLEDNET, the agencies still work together in other ways.

D'Agostini would like a member of probation to be part of the team. Probation can't do forced searches, Catchings said, so some details with that agency need to be worked out.

"It's not just narcotics. We are doing everything," Catchings said of his workload.

SLEDNET was integral in tracking down the phone use of the girl who died following SnowGlobe, and eventually locating the last friend to see her alive.

