

# Calif. targets pot farms polluting waterways

By Kathryn Reed

Chemicals – some of them banned substances in California – are flowing into streams, trees are being cut down without a permit, garbage is strewn about, human waste is not properly disposed of and the soil is so contaminated nothing may grow there again.

This is going on throughout California as people find out-of-the-way places to grow marijuana for medical purposes, and drug cartels consolidate their operations so the product is grown closer to the user and doesn't require crossing international borders.

But now those marijuana growers have another watchdog – the California Water Board and the regional offices, including Lahontan based in South Lake Tahoe.



Illegal pot grows in California are causing the state to intervene. Photo/Shasta County Sheriff's Office

“It is a serious statewide water quality problem – mostly on

the north coast and Central Valley, but we do have illegal grows in our region,” Lauri Kemper, assistant executive director of the Lahontan Regional Water Control Board, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Cris Carrigan with the state agency told the regional board Jan. 14 about the dangers of grows on private land, while Lahontan engineer Eric Taxer spoke about what is going on with public lands.

“All sites have water quality and water diversion issues,” Carrigan said.

Growers are siphoning off water from streams for their crop. Some of the diversions are more impactful to the environment than others. Part has to do with the material used for the diversion.

Of the grows they have come across, Carrigan said, at minimum all are degrading water quality by adding sediment to the system. But most are also adding pollutants.

“This heretofore was an unregulated activity. Law enforcement has not worked,” Carrigan said.

He said the number of grows is five times greater than in 2010.

“These types of things don’t have to happen. They need a business plan,” Carrigan said of the growers. And they need a sustainable ecological plan.

The water board has the authority – and is now using it – to stop these growers from polluting waterways. They are getting warrants to access properties. Property owners, operators and contractors doing the work are all being targeted by the state.

Fines will be levied and abatement plans instituted. The problem the state may have after this pilot program runs out

of money is sustaining the enforcement. The goal is fines that are collected will keep the program going.

These grows – whether for medicinal or illegal sales – are wreaking havoc on the environment, officials say. This includes the land, water, fisheries and wildlife habitat.

Not all grows are illegal. Some jurisdictions allow outdoor cultivation of medical marijuana. But they still might not be employing practices that are in accordance with the state Water Board.

Taxer has found illegal pot grows at elevations as high as 11,000 feet as well as in the barren desert.

“A lot of cartels or drug trafficking organizations seek out-of-the-way places for grows,” he told the Lahontan board.

And because of their remoteness it is often hard for the agencies to cleanup and restore the site because of limited resources.

“Because of climate change there are more pot growers in our area,” Taxer said.

The Sierra has water, while other locations are drying up.

Taxer showed a photo of a bust in Alpine County in August where 4,000 plants growing among the pines were seized.