



Posted on Thursday, September 2, 2010

## Mexico's drug war leaves marijuana growers to thrive

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By **Tim Johnson** | McClatchy Newspapers

CORRE COYOTE, Mexico — Times are good for the dope growers of the western Sierra Madre mountains. The army eradication squads that once hacked at the illicit marijuana fields have been diverted by the drug war that's raging elsewhere in Mexico.

The military's retreat has delighted farmers who are sowing and reaping marijuana. Cannabis cultivation in Mexico soared 35 percent last year and is now higher than at any time in nearly two decades, the State Department says.

It's also been a boon for Mexico's powerful organized-crime groups.

Marijuana is perishable, bulky and less profitable than their other exports — heroin, cocaine and crystal meth — but drug trafficking experts say that every major trafficking organization in Mexico reaps significant income from marijuana, drawing on cross-border criminal networks that carry cannabis to scores of U.S. cities.

"They tend to be a cash cow for the drug trafficking organizations," David T. Johnson, the assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, said during a visit to Mexico this week.

An aerial tour deep into the Sierra Madres at the side of a Mexican army general and a small army eradication unit — one of a handful that are still actively working — shows marijuana crops flourishing in valley after valley of the rugged, pine-covered region.

The mountain slopes and valleys in the part of southern Chihuahua state that's hugged by Sinaloa and Durango states are sometimes called Mexico's Golden Triangle — after the opium-producing Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia — because of their productivity. Illicit crops include not only marijuana but also poppy, the flowering plant that provides the white gummy latex that's later processed into opium and heroin.

It's a dangerous area. Even the poorest farmers tote weapons. A third of the region's population is thought to earn its living from the illicit drug industry.

Peasant farms need little to grow small fields of marijuana: bags of seeds, some fertilizer, lengths of hose for primitive irrigation systems and a few months for the crop to mature into 10-foot tall plants.

According to State Department estimates, the areas of harvestable marijuana fields in Mexico grew from 10,130 acres in 2001 to 29,652 acres in 2009. During the same period, the area of eradication dropped by half.

Destroying marijuana crops isn't easy. Unlike Colombia in South America — which aggressively uses armored aircraft to spray herbicide on coca fields, killing the raw ingredient for cocaine — Mexico largely relies on the brute force of troops to yank up marijuana crops.

On a recent day, sweat poured off soldiers as they tugged to uproot tall marijuana plants. The marijuana grew in a carefully tended field adjacent to a creek. Even without much fertilizer and in rocky ground, the weed grew robustly. When the soldiers couldn't pull up the plants, they hacked at them with machetes.

Then, with a good dousing of gasoline, the piles of uprooted plants went up in flames.

After a dozen soldiers had worked hard for several hours, barely an acre or so of weed had been pulled up and burnt.

Farmers see little stigma — or risk — in growing cannabis.

"It's always been said that poppy is controlled by organized crime, and marijuana is for the people. Growing it is like growing corn," said the general, who spoke to a journalist on the condition — set by Mexico's Defense Ministry — that he not be named.

Marijuana pays better than corn — but not much. A couple of pounds of marijuana sells locally for barely \$15 or \$20. It isn't till the weed moves closer to the U.S. border that the price climbs. Once it's smuggled into U.S. states such as Arizona and Texas, the price soars past \$500 a pound wholesale.

It used to be that smugglers packed several tons of marijuana into tractor-trailers that were crossing the border. The likelihood of detection has made such methods riskier, however, and smugglers now use tunnels, ultra-light aircraft and other methods to get the dope across, even packing it on the backs of illegal migrants.

"Marijuana is very, very profitable but it is difficult to transport," said Francesco Pipitone, a crime expert at the Mexico City office of Kroll Associates, a global risk-consulting company with headquarters in New York.

Surveys show that some 3 million Mexicans use marijuana with some regularity. That pales next to the United States, however, where the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported in May that nearly 26 million Americans had used marijuana in the past year.

The biggest competition for Mexican cartels comes from domestic marijuana growers in the United States. A document produced by local, state and federal law enforcement officials in California's Central Valley, a major hub for marijuana cultivation, says that California's 2009 marijuana harvest alone surpassed the annual estimated harvest of nearly 32,000 tons in Mexico. It put overall U.S. marijuana production at 76,380 tons.

"Mexicans sometimes tell me that they think we are self-sufficient in marijuana," Johnson said.

In reality, though, Mexican pot may remain popular because it's far cheaper than domestically grown cannabis in the United States is. The low price of the less-potent Mexican marijuana buoys demand, inducing cartels to stick with it as a revenue-producer.

"Marijuana is a very lucrative business for every Mexican cartel due to the fact that they control it from cultivation to wholesale distribution," said Joseph M. Arabit, the Drug Enforcement Administration special agent in charge of the El Paso, Texas, field division.

Estimates vary widely on how important marijuana revenue is to Mexico's criminal groups, which have expanded into activities outside of drugs.

One expert, Edgardo Buscaglia, who was a research scholar at the Hoover Institution, a right-of-center research center at Stanford University, until 2008 and now teaches in Mexico City, said he thought that marijuana revenue amounted to "less than 10 percent" of income for the crime syndicates.

"Overall, drugs are No. 1 in terms of net income," Buscaglia said, referring to the spectrum of narcotics and marijuana. "But then you have counterfeiting, smuggling, human trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, in that order."

Experts in the Mexican and U.S. governments offer estimates as high as 20 to 30 percent, noting that marijuana — unlike cocaine, which must come from its source in the Andean region of South America — is grown at low cost and is a steady, year-round source of basic income for cartel kingpins.

"They use it to fund all their activities," said David Cuthbertson, the FBI's special agent in charge of the border region around El Paso.

He added that marijuana smuggling had changed over the years. "They used to deliver it by the ton. . . . Now it's a couple of hundred pounds," he said. "People get killed over losing a load of marijuana now."

Mexican cartels have pushed hard into marijuana cultivation in the United States, sending satellite groups to farm hidden plots within U.S. national forests. One cartel, the Familia Michoacana, maintains extensive plantations in California, deploying illegal migrants to guard and maintain hidden grow sites.

As the drug war has intensified, tallying more than 28,000 fatalities since late 2006, President Felipe Calderon has found the army and navy forces stretched thin and unable to carry out intensive eradication efforts.

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