

CAL FIRE Safety Communication 2012-04

FIRELINE & GENERAL FIELD SAFETY – CULTIVATION THREAT

On August 30, 2012, at 13:49 hours a firefighter was threatened with a loaded shotgun. The firefighter was doing Fire Line Suppression Repair in full fire line personal protective equipment and accessed the site in a marked CAL FIRE vehicle. At the time, he was assessing mitigation for a constructed dozer line. The firefighter observed a marijuana garden near the dozer line but marijuana was common within the fire perimeter thus he focused on his task and ignored the garden. The firefighter was an in-unit resource and had knowledge of the general fire area.

The firefighter saw a vehicle pull up behind his vehicle. The suspect ordered the firefighter to leave the area. The firefighter explained he was doing official duties. The suspect again ordered him to leave the area “now” and looked down at a shotgun he had pointed at the firefighter within close range. The shotgun was later determined to be loaded. The firefighter left the scene and reported the incident to his line supervisor and then to law enforcement. The suspect was arrested later in the day.

The Incident Action Plan safety messages in the few days leading up to this incident did not discuss marijuana cultivation safety awareness. During safety briefings there were reportedly only occasional references to marijuana grows. The fire was in an area known locally as a heavy cultivation area.

SIGNS YOU ARE IN OR NEAR A MARIJUANA GROW SITE

Presence of Marijuana Plants (or a distinctive skunk-like, pungent odor)

Irrigation Pipe/Dripline/Timers

Potting Soil Bags/Grow Bags

Isolated Water Tanks

Garbage (usually discarded grow materials, toilet paper, and food containers)

Rustic Camps/Trailers

Dammed Creeks (sometimes filled with fertilizers or other contaminants)

Fertilizers/Chemicals/Animal Poisons & Traps

MAINTAIN A MINDSET IN REMOTE AREAS:

- Always stay alert – Situational Awareness is a key attribute
- If possible work in pairs¹
- Apply the LCES principle
- Position your vehicle so you can leave quickly
- Exercise caution when you encounter well worn narrow trails with trimmed brush
- Recognize marijuana grow sites and growers may be camouflaged
- Assume a compassionate use grow – 25 plants or less (also known as “medicinal” or “215” grow) is as dangerous as a large grow
- Ensure you have a field safety accountability system in place with your work supervisor/emergency command center/Incident Command System supervisor
- Report any changes in work location
- Always carry a handie-talkie/cell phone with fresh batteries/full charge and recognize communication holes
- Recognize the presence of perennial water sources (especially during the late season)

IF YOU ENCOUNTER A GROW SITE:

- Always stay alert – Situational Awareness is a key attribute
- Watch for people, weapons, and vicious dogs
- Watch for booby traps
- Do not explore the area
- Immediately retreat (if on foot, best to retrace your path back)
- Note landmarks and take a GPS waypoint only if it can be safely done
- Do not engage growers
- Report your find to your supervisor and law enforcement
- If assigned to an incident ensure that the Safety Officer is aware of your find

MARIJUANA PLANT RECOGNITION

¹ This practice was effective in identifying Mendocino County double-murder suspect Aaron Bassler



Marijuana Plant in a Forested Setting



Marijuana Leaf and Bud on Female Plant

(Photos courtesy of DFG)