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MARIJUANA CULTIVATION RESPONSE GUIDELINES

**PRESENTED BY THE
INCIDENT SAFETY SUBCOMMITTEE**



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Background

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Incidents

Situational
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Identification
of Farms and
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Marijuana was legalized for medical use in California in 1996 and for recreational use since November 2016.

Although it is legal for both medical and recreational use, commercial grow operations are becoming more common and there is still a significant risk to firefighter safety from illegal growing operations. This presentation is intended to highlight the dangers faced by firefighters when encountering illegal and unregulated growing operations.



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Definitions

- **Grow House-** A grow house is a property, usually located in a suburban residential neighborhood, that is primary used for the production of marijuana.
- **Cultivation-**A practice and process of producing cannabis flowers.
- **Cultivation Site-** A location where cannabis is planted, grown, harvested, dried, cured, graded, or trimmed or a location where any combination of those activities occur.



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Background

- Growing marijuana on public lands is illegal
- Hidden grow sites are becoming more common
- In the past, marijuana cultivation was intended for personal use
- Many of the present-day marijuana operations are associated with organized crime
- The potential for violent confrontation is high
- Firefighters responding to wildland fires involving marijuana cultivation are challenged by a variety of safety concerns



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Background

- Response to marijuana cultivation requires a high level of situational awareness
- Firefighter safety is the highest priority
- Incidents involving marijuana cultivation may include the rescue or recovery of victims, providing medical assistance, fire suppression, and will require coordination with law enforcement
- Pre-incident training and preparedness drills should be conducted to build a close partnership with assisting and cooperating agencies



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Types of Grows

- Indoor – residence, businesses, structures or large green houses
- Outdoor – hidden on farms, forests, state and public land





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Recent Incidents: Siskiyou County – Lava Fire

- Outdoor grows in a remote area and protected by a largely homogenous cultural group
- As the fire burned near the grows several violent incidents occurred
- One grower wanted to enter an evacuated area and when denied, he fired on law enforcement
- At times the growers banded together to use vehicles to blockade entry into their areas



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Recent Incidents: Siskiyou County – Lava Fire

- A public works employee was nearly struck by a vehicle breaching a roadblock
- A local fire department vehicle returned to camp with a bullet hole in it





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Grower vs. Grower Violence – Aguanga, Riverside County

- An illegal marijuana grow in a residence
- September 7, 2020, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department went to the house for a call of multiple homicides
- 7 people were killed in the home – an 8th was left alive – nothing was stolen





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Situational Awareness

- Growers are almost always armed and willing to use force against anyone
- Armed guards are often present
- Operations may be organized and sophisticated with support from an organized drug trafficking organization
- Traps may be set along the perimeter of the grow





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Situational Awareness

- Blockades may be used to impede access
- Hazardous materials may be present such as
- Unregulated and Banned fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides
- Propane tanks





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Firefighter safety for illicit dangerous chemicals.



<https://cameochemicals.noaa.gov/chemical/2809>



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Identification of Farms and Hidden Grows

- Rows of green houses
- Security measures – razor wire and fencing that obstructs views
- Signs of human occupation in substandard conditions
- Pipes used for water irrigation in the middle of the forest
- Signs of long-term human camping
- Fertilizers and pesticides in the forest



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Green Houses





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Water Irrigation





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Substandard Living Conditions





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Law Enforcement's Role

- Engage local law enforcement early and often
- Coordinate first responder safety with law enforcement
- Have law enforcement clear the grow prior to engaging in firefighting
- Request law enforcement escorts





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Incident Dispatch and Response for Marijuana Cultivation Incidents

- A response may appear to be routine, based upon dispatch information, until arriving on scene
- An incident may appear relatively safe upon arrival, yet can change quickly
- Initial and continuous size-ups are essential
- Additional hazards presented with these incidents will guide/determine operational objectives
- Law enforcement should be notified immediately
- Appropriate PPE and safety considerations should be identified for all emergency personnel



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Incident Dispatch and Response for Marijuana Cultivation Incidents

- Maintain LCES
- Many grow operators monitor radio frequencies - minimize radio traffic
- Gross decontamination should be conducted when necessary
- Request response from hazardous materials team personnel





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Safety Measures to Remember

- Do not touch anything in the cultivation area
- Do not turn on/off any electrical power or light switches
- Do not eat or drink in or around a cultivation area
- Do not open or remove containers with chemicals or suspected chemicals
- Wash your hands and face thoroughly



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Potential Hazards of Marijuana Cultivation Incidents

- Booby traps-anti personnel devices
- Violent occupants
- Weapons on site
- Aggressive animals
- Fire
- Structural damage
- Electrical system tampering
- Oxygen deficient atmospheres
- Environmental – mold, chemical use and foreign substances



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Warning Signs of Potential Grow House/Cultivation Sites

- Unusual smell/odor
- Condensation on windows
- Excessive air conditioning units
- Rarely occupied home
- Unusually large electrical service or wiring modifications
- Unusual waste such as fertilizer containers, soil amendments and pots beside a house that has no yard or an unkept lawn
- Continuous sound of electrical generators or fans
- Indoor high voltage lights or excessive lighting



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Warning Signs of Potential Grow House/Cultivation Sites

- Cameras, high fences, locked gates, heavy chains, boarded/covered windows, or unusually high security
- Marking and camouflage of trails
- Buried or disguised water lines
- Chicken wire or field fence in odd places
- Animal poison
- Messy campsites in untraveled areas
- Campsites with PVC, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, gardening tools, and drip tubing
- Suspicious individuals



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Emergency Contacts

- Law enforcement: Local, State, and Federal
- Hazardous Materials Response Team
- Building Department and Structural Engineers
- Environmental Health Department
- Medical transport
- LEMSA – Declaration of MCI
- Fish and Wildlife
- EPA
- Terrorism Liaison Officer



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Non-Emergency

- Stop and take careful note of your surroundings
- Exit area the same way you entered
- Mark the location on a map or record GPS location
- Note descriptions of vehicles or people in the area
- Move slowly and do not change your behavior
- Most growers carry scanners – refrain from radio use and use cellphones



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ILLICIT MARIJUANA GROWS IN THE WILDLAND FIRE ENVIRONMENT

**IMMEDIATELY LEAVE THE AREA.
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CONTACT/DETAIN ANY PERSONS WORKING THE GROW.**

INDICATIONS OF MARIJUANA GROWS

- Obvious signs: strong odor of burnt or unburnt marijuana and/or marijuana plants present
- Unnatural trails in and out of an area
- Irrigation equipment
 - Tubing and pipes
 - Plastic lining (rolled or unrolled)
 - Small makeshift reservoirs
 - Pesticides
- Large amounts of trash
- Camping/cooking equipment
- Armed individuals
- Roadside drops of food and/or equipment on mountain/fire roads

HAZARDS OF MARIJUANA GROWS

- HazMat conditions due to pesticides
- Persons armed with weapons
- Makeshift weaponized traps
 - Holes in ground
 - Bear traps
 - Tensioned branch spikes
- Guard dogs

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS FOR FIREFIGHTERS

- Immediately leave the area of the marijuana grow
- Once in a safe location make notifications to the following:
 - Incident Commander
 - Safety
 - Law Enforcement
 - Adjoining forces
- Do not confront and/or attempt to detain any individuals working within the marijuana grows. People working within illicit grows are known for violence against public safety official and civilians. They are typically heavily armed and should be considered extremely dangerous.



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<https://firescope.caloes.ca.gov/>

