Joint law enforcement agencies conduct marijuana eradication

Written by Staff Reports
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Operation takes down grow houses near Shiprock

SHIPROCK, NAVAJO NATION—The Navajo Police Department assisted federal and supporting law enforcement entities from Nov. 9-11 in conducting "Operation Navajo Gold," a unified effort to execute search warrants relating to suspected illegal marijuana farming near Shiprock, N.M. This action was the result of months of coordination between the Navajo Nation and local, state, and federal agencies to enforce both Navajo and federal laws.

Twenty-one farms and two residences first came to the attention of the Navajo Police Department and Navajo Nation Department of Justice after community members raised concerns about rapidly growing "hemp" farming operations.

The marijuana was housed in 1,107 grow houses, and dozens more were under construction when the eradication effort took place.

During the court-authorized operation, agents eradicated approximately 260,000 live plants and processed an estimated 60,000 pounds (30 tons) of evidence. Additionally, agents found 19 trash bags filled with fully processed marijuana - 1,000 pounds - in baggies, ready for distribution, hidden under a tarp in a grow house.

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"The top priority is the safety and well-being of our Navajo citizens and law enforcement officers," Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said.

"The coordinated efforts and tireless work of all involved has brought the much-needed resolution to the marijuana operations and has given the Navajo Nation citizens, as well as the surrounding communities, peace of mind," Chief of Police Phillip Francisco of the Navajo Police Department stated. "This operation is a testament to the professionalism of law enforcement, who have worked diligently to ensure the safety of our communities."

"Through the cooperative efforts of federal, tribal, state and local law enforcement partners, we have put a stop to a massive marijuana grow operation, which was being carried out under the guise of hemp farming," Kyle W. Williamson, Special Agent in Charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso Division said. "The persons running this marijuana operation were doing so in disregard of tribal law, the health and well-being of tribal members, and the natural resources of the Navajo Nation. We thank community members for saying something when they saw something."

"Large-scale growing operations, such as this one, can pose a serious risk to human health and the environment," Special Agent in Charge Christopher Brooks of the Environmental Protection Agency's Criminal Investigation Division in New Mexico said.

"This case had many jurisdictional hurdles. Thanks to the longstanding partnerships between federal, state and local law enforcement, we came together to stop a significant criminal enterprise in our community," San Juan County Sheriff R. Shane Ferrari said. "San Juan County is truly blessed to have these dedicated professionals to keep our communities safe."

Federal agencies involved in the effort included: the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Mexico, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Environmental Protection Agency's Criminal Investigations Division, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Tribal, state and local agencies included the Navajo Police Department, the Navajo Department of Criminal Investigations, the New Mexico State Police, the Region II Narcotics Task Force, the New Mexico Army National Guard, the San Juan County Sheriff's Office, the Farmington Police Department, the Aztec Police Department, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

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