



SHANNON D. DICUS, SHERIFF CORONER



STATEMENT OF  
LIEUTENANT LARRY LOPEZ  
SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT  
H.R. 1820 FEDERAL LANDS AMPLIFIED SECURITY FOR  
THE HOMELAND (FLASH) ACT

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
MARCH 11, 2025

Good morning, Chair Tiffany (R-Wis.), Ranking Member Neguse (D-CO), and members of the committee:

My name is Lieutenant Larry Lopez, and I am honored to testify today on behalf of San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus and our department. We urgently need federal support to combat the illegal activities plaguing our federal lands—activities that endanger public safety, devastate our environment, and violate human rights.

I strongly support H.R. 1820, the Federal Lands Amplified Security for the Homeland Act (FLASH Act), which directly addresses the public safety crisis and environmental destruction caused by illegal operations on federal lands—particularly in San Bernardino County, home to some of the largest and most vulnerable federal lands in the country.

This legislation provides critical enforcement tools, stronger penalties, and enhanced collaboration between federal and local agencies to dismantle organized criminal operations, prevent environmental destruction, and protect our communities.

Sheriff Dicus is a member of the Major County Sheriffs of America (MCSA), which represents sheriffs of the most populous counties in the United States from both political parties. The threat from illicit cannabis operations on public lands is one of many drug-related threats that law enforcement, public health, and families are facing every day. To address these threats, MCSA has encouraged Congress to pass the HALT Fentanyl Act to ensure law enforcement has investigative tools to deter fentanyl trafficking as much as possible. MCSA has also worked closely with many members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to push for the reauthorization of the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Program at

the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). HIDTA provides resources that enable close collaboration among local, state, and federal law enforcement to combat the most significant drug trafficking organizations, including the cartels that are linked to cannabis operations on our public lands

## **LT. LOPEZ BACKGROUND**

I have been honored to serve in the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department for 25 years with assignments including corrections and patrol in rural communities within the Morongo Basin and Joshua Tree area. In addition to patrol, I have served multiple ranks in specialized capacities, including our Specialized Enforcement Division or SWAT team and our narcotics division. I'm proud to be the recipient of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Frank Bland Medal of Valor, the California Peace Officers' Association Medal of Valor, the Governor's Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor, and the Congressional Badge of Bravery for my involvement with the "Christopher Dorner Manhunt in 2013.

In 2022, I was promoted to Lieutenant and am currently assigned to the Gangs and Narcotics Division. In this position, I oversee the daily operations of the Inland Regional Narcotics Task Force, the Overdose Response Team, the Electronic Surveillance Unit, the Marijuana Enforcement Team, and the High-Tech Detail.

Given my role in law enforcement and my deep familiarity with San Bernardino County's federal lands, I can speak to the unique challenges we face in enforcing the law across such a vast and remote region.

## **SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY BACKGROUND**

For context, San Bernardino County is the largest County in the continental United States, with a land mass of over 20,000 square miles – larger than New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island put together.

San Bernardino County is a diverse geographical region with large valleys, mountainous terrain, and expansive desert regions. We are also home to two of the most populated national forests – the Angeles National Forest and the San Bernardino County Forest. Approximately 80 percent of the land mass of San Bernardino County is made up of federal lands—the 2.2 million citizens we serve in sixty-six communities in collaboration with our municipal police departments. Our residents are primarily isolated and surrounded by federal lands in mountain regions and desert areas. This means that San Bernardino County is often impacted by law enforcement activities and federally mandated search and rescue activities that the Sheriff's Department responds to with assistance from our fire district.

## **ILLEGAL CANNABIS CULTIVATION IN DESERT REGIONS**

As it relates to the FLASH Act, I want to bring up a significant issue associated with San Bernardino County's rural desert regions, which encompass federal lands like the Mojave National Preserve, Joshua Tree National Park, and areas near the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center and Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command located in Twentynine Palms. This base is currently home to one of the largest military training areas in the nation. The Mojave Viper program has become the pre-Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment training model at the base. The majority of units in the Marine Corps deploying to Iraq were trained at Mojave Viper or a mixed venue using the Mountain Warfare Training Center for Afghanistan.

In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of illegal cannabis cultivation in this region. The FLASH Act includes provisions in Section 211 establishing robust response initiatives with local jurisdictions, law enforcement, and fire agencies to increase fines and penalties.

Section 211 would also establish the Trespass Cannabis Cultivation Site Response Initiative, under which the Secretary concerned must conduct an environmental response on lands under their jurisdiction in response to the illegal cultivation of cannabis.

With a region as vast as San Bernardino County, we have found that National Forest land cannabis grows are extremely labor-intensive for our Deputy Sheriffs.

This is critically important because the laws in California as they relate to cannabis are governed by the 2016 ballot measure called Proposition 64. Proposition 64 downgraded the illegal cultivation of cannabis from a felony to a misdemeanor, reducing deterrence and stripping local law enforcement of the ability to impose severe penalties. Without federal statutes like those proposed in the FLASH Act, we lack the authority to prosecute cartel-linked operations effectively. This Act would give us the tools to impose real consequences on those destroying our lands and exploiting vulnerable individuals.

These illicit grows are nothing like what you might be expecting – an episode of Breaking Bad – they are full-grade industrial operations with links to cartel organizations and human trafficking operations. As publicized in the news in recent months, cartel operations millions of dollars on illicit cannabis as well as utilizing slave labor for subjects from Mexico coming to the United States and seeking assistance to cross the border from cartel organizations – if these subjects cannot pay the cartels to go to the U.S., we believe they are being subjected to

slave labor at illegal cannabis operations in regions like ours to pay off a debt to the cartel. This is a travesty to human rights and basic dignity.

## **ILLEGAL CANNABIS IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT**

These illegal cannabis operations are not interested in protecting our unique desert environment; they are only motivated by profit from slave labor but also utilizing chemicals that are not legal – including compounds of carbofuran that have a level of toxicity that has the potential to harm consumers of cannabis. Carbofuran is considered one of the most toxic pesticides. It is classified as a highly hazardous substance in the United States as defined in Section 302 of the United States Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act. This has effectively banned the use of the toxic substance in the U.S., which indicates that cartels are smuggling this pesticide across the U.S.-Mexico Border.

Research conducted by the Integral Ecology Research Center<sup>1</sup> has found traces of carbofuran in streams, rivers, and animals, including at-risk species such as Pacific fish. ¼ of a teaspoon of carbofuran can be fatal to humans.

Illegal cannabis operations on federal lands don't just harm our local environment; the contaminated cannabis they produce often ends up in states where marijuana is still illegal, endangering consumers nationwide. The toxic chemicals in these operations flow through our rivers and streams, impacting species far beyond our county. The FLASH Act addresses these issues nationally, making it a critical legislation for every American.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2019-08-28/cannabis-california-national-forests-environment>

One of the most important portions of the FLASH Act is the provisions located in Section 212 – which creates additional federal criminal penalties that we don't have under California statute for the use of banned pesticides and rodenticides during the commission of a federal offense, with a maximum sentence of 10 years in addition to the punishment for the original offense.

## **CARBOFURAN AND PUBLIC HEALTH FOR CANNABIS CONSUMERS**

According to research from the LA Times<sup>2</sup>, illegally smuggled carbofuran from Mexico to the U.S. is used on 90% of marijuana grown on public land in California. Illicit cannabis contaminated with carbofuran from California is a significant source of marijuana in states where it remains illegal.

As this problem proliferated throughout our region in San Bernardino County, some of our northern counties in California, like Siskiyou and Humboldt County, also saw the same thing because there were virtually no consequences in California law under Proposition 64.

Recently, the Los Angeles Times<sup>3</sup> tested twenty-five cannabis products that were purchased from California-legal retail stores and had tested at private labs, which showed concentrations of pesticides above levels that the state allows or at levels that exceed federal standards for tobacco. The contaminants (Chlorfenapyr, Pymetrozine, Trifloxystrobin, Bifenazate, and Chlorpyrifos) include chemicals tied to cancer, liver failure, thyroid disease, and genetic and neurological harm to users and unborn children. These harmful pesticides, many of which originate from

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2019-08-28/cannabis-california-national-forests-environment>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-06-14/the-dirty-secret-of-californias-legal-weed>

China, are being smuggled into the United States and used in illegal cannabis cultivation on public lands.

Seized cannabis from illegal grows in San Bernardino and Siskiyou counties has been traced to licensed facilities in Oregon and California, revealing a dangerous contamination risk. Many of these samples are coming back with these harmful pesticides that are originating on our public lands and inundated the legal market, creating a public health situation where users of cannabis believe that their cannabis is “legal” and safe, but it is not safe. These pesticides are avoided detection by labs because states like California do not require labs to test foreign-labeled pesticides. After all, we shouldn’t be using them. This poses a severe public health threat and contributes to environmental degradation.

## **OPERATION HAMMER STRIKE**

As this problem became more prevalent in our County, with over 1,400 reports from residents of cannabis cultivations, Sheriff Dicus established Operation Hammer Strike with support from the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors in August of 2021.

Operation Hammer Strike is a years-long operation targeting illegal marijuana cultivation and yielded the following results:

- 1,496,906 marijuana plants eradicated
- 194,821 pounds of processed marijuana seized
- \$3,631,667.00 U.S. Currency seized
- 33 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) labs mitigated
- 363 firearms seized
- 1,379 arrests made
- 1,087 search warrants served
- 8,771 greenhouses cleared



As of September 2024, we have two Marijuana Enforcement Teams, and we estimate we still have approximately 100 illegal cannabis cultivation sites in San Bernardino County.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, our challenges in San Bernardino County—particularly on our federal lands—are urgent and complex. Illegal cannabis cultivation, driven by organized crime, is wreaking havoc on our environment and our communities. These operations threaten public safety, fuel human trafficking, and introduce toxic chemicals into our ecosystems, putting both local wildlife and consumers across the nation at risk. While committed to addressing these issues, local law enforcement is stretched too thin and lacks the legal authority to combat this problem entirely.

The Federal Lands Amplified Security for the Homeland (FLASH) Act offers a vital solution. By providing more substantial penalties, federal resources, and better coordination between federal and local agencies, this legislation will empower us to dismantle these criminal enterprises and protect our national lands. I urge this Committee to support the FLASH Act and give law enforcement the tools we need to secure our borders, safeguard our environment, and restore safety to our communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.