

# **Cartel Impacts to Tribal Lands throughout America**

## **Presented to:**

House Committee on Natural Resources  
(Subcommittee for Oversight and Investigations)

## **Presented by:**

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US Capitol – Washington DC

My name is John Nores, and I am a retired special operations game warden Lieutenant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). It was an honor to be a game warden and serve 28 years protecting our nation's wildlife, waterway and wildland resources and stopping wildlife and environmental protection law violators was a privilege.

California game wardens are statewide police officers while also being Federally deputized to enforce Federal wildlife protection laws. I began my journey with the police training academy in 1992 and at that time I could never have anticipated that the end of my operational career two decades later would be spent leading a specialized unit of game wardens dedicated to combating Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO's), aka "cartel" infiltration of our nation's pristine public and rural private lands to grow toxically tainted black-market cannabis for nationwide distribution.

This proved to be true as drug cartel operations within California and every other state in our nation have become some of the most egregious environmental and wildlife resource crimes and public safety threats we have seen throughout America.

Through their use of US EPA banned chemical insecticides and rodenticides (carbofuran, Metaphos, Q-Furan, etc.) and massive amounts of water theft (especially alarming during recent peak drought years in the country) throughout tens of thousands of clandestine cannabis grow sites on both public and private land, cartel cells are poisoning waterways, killing numerous wildlife species, destroying wildland trees, vegetation and grass lands while posing a severe threat to our public's safety.

The public safety threats posed by these criminal cells are evident in cartel grow sites we have encountered with firearms, stabbing blades, and various anti-personal traps (i.e., Vietnam war era punji pits) as well as toxic poisons and other public safety threats common throughout these sites.

The cartel's propensity for violence, however, was first witnessed on a deadly cannabis grow arrest and eradication mission in the Silicon Valley foothills we conducted with the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office on August 5th, 2005.

While entering the grow site, our allied agency enforcement team was ambushed by cartel gunmen defending their multi-million dollar complex and a gunfight ensued. A near-fatal bullet from a grower's AK47 struck our young warden teammate, penetrating both of his legs before an agonizing three hour wait for his helicopter evacuation to the hospital.

That incident was the first time a law enforcement officer in America had been hit and nearly killed by a clandestine marijuana grower's bullet, and our first violent encounter with tactically savvy cartel operatives from Mexico running their operations in the US, in this case within the Silicon Valley.

We would have four more officer involved shooting incidents and numerous other violent encounters with cartel grower groups defending their black-market cannabis operations throughout California before I was tasked with co-developing and leading a special operations group of game wardens within our agency called the Marijuana Enforcement Team (MET).

Comprised of officers with extensive tactical experience, wilderness fieldcraft, (stalking, apprehension, and survival skills), amazing lifesaving apprehension and detection K9 partners, a sniper unit, national guard, and allied agency law enforcement helicopter teams, the MET's mission was clear:

- Apprehend and prosecute illegal and dangerous growers to protect our public.
- Eradicate their black market (in many cases poisonous and highly toxic) crop before reaching the national black market.
- Environmentally restore illegal outdoor trespass grow sites by removing water diversions, restoring waterways, removing grow site poisons, encampments, and other waste to reclamate the site back to its natural state on pristine public and private lands.

I led the MET until operational retirement in December of 2018 and between July 2013 and December 2018, our documented production levels paint an ominous picture during those first five years:

- **800** arrest, eradication, environmental reclamation missions.
- Destroyed **three million** toxically tainted cannabis plants.
- Destroyed **58,677 pounds (29 tons)** of toxically tainted processed cannabis for sale and distribution.
- Made **973 felony arrests** (*approximately 90% of those arrests made on cartel or cartel affiliated Mexican nationals operating in the US illegally*).
- Seized and destroyed **601 firearms**.
- Removed **899,945 pounds (450 tons)** of grow site waste and other pollutants.
- Removed **2.35 million feet (455 miles)** of irrigation pipe.
- Removed **91,728 pounds (46 tons)** of fertilizers.
- Removed **756 gallons** of illegal toxic chemicals.
- Dismantled **793 water stealing dams** from these clandestine grow complexes with these dams (and many other illegal cannabis water diversions) *depleting billions of gallons of water during California's peak drought period*.

These figures represent only a fraction of the extent of damage cartels generate throughout the US **with a significant amount of these clandestine grow sites occurring on our most vulnerable communities, remote tribal lands.**

Given an estimated hundreds of thousands of cartel operatives that have infiltrated reservations across the American West, and the extremely limited number of tribal enforcement personnel responsible for covering massive territories, tribal police forces cannot effectively combat this problem alone. Outnumbered, understaffed and underfunded, Northern California's Hoopa Valley and Yurok tribes reached out to our MET for assistance.

Between 2013 and 2018 we committed to working directly with both tribes being impacted by large numbers of cartel marijuana grow operations on their forests. Of most concern were the egregious impacts to pristine tribal waterways, specifically the Trinity river. The Trinity is the lifeblood of

both tribes and relied on for drinking water, ceremonies and their main food source – salmon. And near and dear to us game wardens, the Trinity river also hosts steelhead trout, a state and federally listed endangered species.

It was a privilege to work alongside tribal police officers dedicated to stopping the cartel's destruction of their sacred waterway and wildlife resources while protecting their communities. During these allied agency operations, we encountered hundreds of historical cartel grow sites, found numerous EPA banned toxic poisons throughout those clandestine grows, dismantled numerous water diversions, removed hundreds of tons of grow site waste and pollutants and restored hundreds of waterways.

While I have outlined the wild land, waterway and wildlife resource crimes engendered by these criminal groups and the associated dangers to our public's safety from my operational experience, we must remember that these TCO's are poly-criminals whose organizations engage in numerous other public safety crimes beyond toxically tainted black market cannabis production.

DEA officials point out that the Mexican cartels are now partnered with the Chinese cartels to the benefit of both organizations. Chinese crime groups supply the pre-cursor chemicals the Mexican cartels need to produce and distribute fentanyl and meth-amphetamine now killing hundreds of thousands of Americans annually, while the Chinese have virtually taken over the black market cannabis trade using America as the middle man to launder billions of untraceable cash dollars (<https://youtu.be/xMsLDv4M0VM?si=Bkk8IqHS5F4DEZsH>).

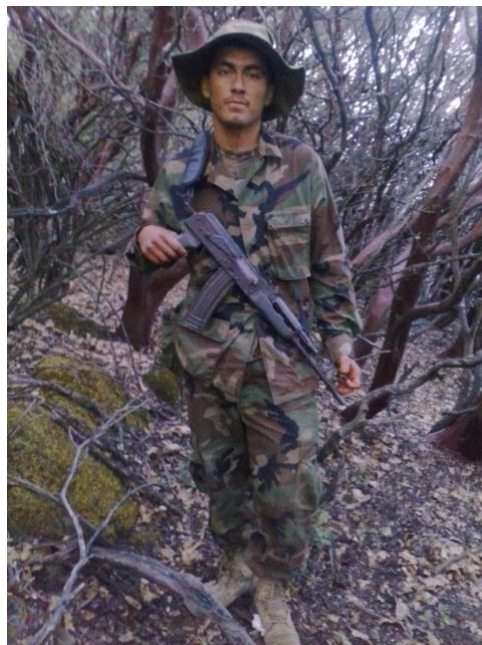
Once again, our most vulnerable communities are being heavily targeted with crime and overdoses surging throughout tribal nations. In my home state of Montana for example, the Mexican cartels have targeted tribal communities in the most remote part, of the most remote state, in our nation.

Given that a single deadly fentanyl tablet can yield up to \$100 on the black market, the cartels have moved in and taken over the fentanyl and

meth-amphetamine trade, while engaged in numerous other crimes throughout these communities including human trafficking, theft and more. Tribes like the Crow, Cheyenne and Black Feet are being decimated as cartel operatives are leaving reservation communities strung out, addicted or worse.

Given the vastness of this part of Montana, tribal police officers are even more outnumbered with an average of two BIA officers responsible for approximately 440,000 remote acres making it nearly impossible to hinder any cartel operations within their jurisdiction.

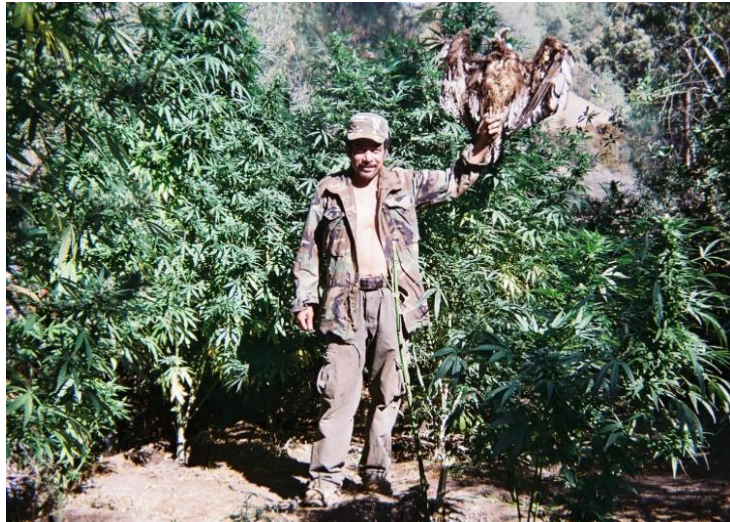
These examples from my past and present home states illustrate how effective and efficient the cartels are operating throughout all of America, especially on our tribal lands. None of us are immune to the dangers these criminal groups present throughout our homeland as our public and our pristine wildland, waterway and wildlife resources continue to be poisoned and destroyed. Given everything we have seen while combating this issue, stopping the cartels from operating within America to poison our tribal communities must be a top priority.



Cartel gunman in grow complex



Cartel grow site - Carbofuran poisoned Mountain Lion



Cartel grower with poisoned golden eagle



Mexican cartel EPA banned grow site poisons



Cartel grow site Vietnam era anti-personnel punji pit



Outdoor cartel grow site



Cartel grow site - river water stealing





Northern CA Cartel grow site waste



Cartel grow site pristine stream diversion



Cartel grow site: Underground water stealing.



Mexican cartel gunmen in outdoor grow complex



Cartel grows – EPA banned poison killed grey fox



New and highly toxic Chinese cartel grow site poisons



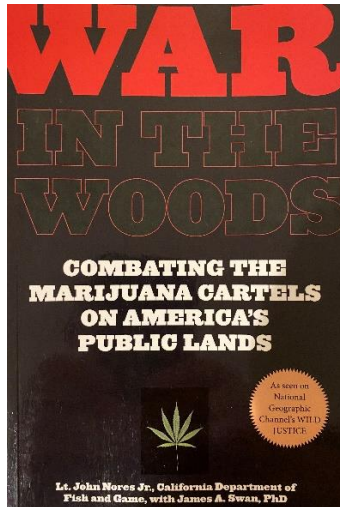
Cartel grow living quarters - exterior



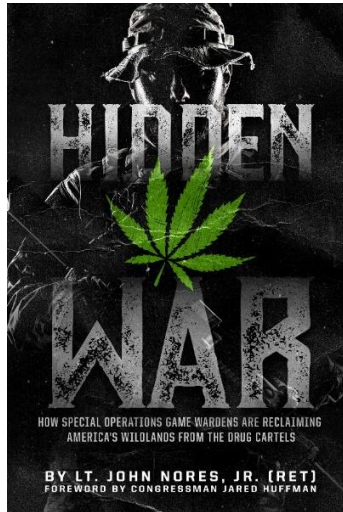
Cartel grow living quarters - interior



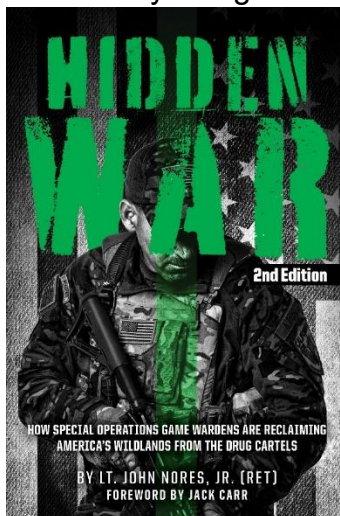
Cartel river grow site camp



War in the Woods - 2010



Hidden War Edition 1 – Forward by Congressman Jared Huffman - 2019



Hidden War – Updated Edition 2 – Forward by Jack Carr - 2023