

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 2, 2024

The Honorable Merrick Garland
Attorney General of the United States
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Garland,

We are deeply concerned with reports from across the country regarding Chinese nationals and organized crime cultivating marijuana on United States farmland. In some cases, the grow operators were also engaged in human trafficking, forced labor, drug trafficking, and violent crime.¹ These farms are most commonly in states with legal marijuana programs where illicit growers try to disguise their operations in communities where law-abiding Americans live and work.² The thousands of illicit Chinese marijuana growing operations pose a direct threat to public safety, human rights, national security, and the addiction crisis gripping our nation.³ We write to you today to inquire about efforts by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to address this developing criminal enterprise.

Chinese nationals—including those with potential ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—are reportedly operating thousands of illicit marijuana farms across the country.⁴ A leaked Department of Homeland Security (DHS) document from August 2023 estimated Asian transnational criminal organizations are linked to up to 749 of these sites just in Maine and Washington state alone.⁵ Much remains unknown, but experts assert “the number of farms funded by sources traceable back to Chinese investors or owners has skyrocketed,” as have “the presence of Chinese owners and workers ... at illegal grows.”⁶ Experts believe there is substantial evidence implicating the CCP in directly supporting illicit marijuana grow operations across the United States.⁷ Further, the same DHS document indicated 270 suspected illicit marijuana operations in rural Maine generated an estimated \$4.37 billion in revenue, far

¹ Beth Warren, “Cartel-Backed Pot Grows Linked to Human Trafficking, Inhumane Working Conditions,” USA Today, June 18, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2023/06/18/cartel-backed-pot-grows-linked-to-california-oregon-human-trafficking/70329795007/>.

² Liyan Qi, “How Chinese Marijuana Operations Cropped Up in Small-Town America,” The Wall Street Journal, November 30, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/law/how-chinese-marijuana-operations-cropped-up-in-small-town-america-45b7b598>.

³ Natalie Fertig, “The Growing Chinese Investment in Illegal American Weed,” POLITICO, March 21, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/03/21/illicit-cannabis-china-00086125>.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Steve Robinson, “Triad Weed: How Chinese Marijuana Grows Took over Rural Maine,” The Maine Wire, November 8, 2023, <https://www.themainewire.com/2023/11/triad-weed-illegal-chinese-marijuana-grows-are-all-over-maine/>.

⁶ Fertig, *supra* note 3.

⁷ Id.

outpacing the \$158 million from the state's legal marijuana market last year.⁸ Most of these properties were acquired after recreational marijuana sales became legal in Maine.⁹ In Oklahoma, a state with over 2,300 medical dispensaries,¹⁰ over 2,000 marijuana farms are linked to China.¹¹ According to the Director of the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics (OBN), "national and transnational criminals ... [are] moving this product on the black market and laundering money – millions and millions of dollars – back to [China and other countries of concern], which is funding these terrorist and communist states."¹²

Sophisticated Chinese-affiliated marijuana operations have also been discovered in California,¹³ Washington,¹⁴ Oregon,¹⁵ Massachusetts,¹⁶ Michigan,¹⁷ and Nevada.¹⁸ For example, in Colorado, a Chinese cartel bought suburban homes near Denver and grew thousands of marijuana plants in residential basements.¹⁹ Whether located in retrofitted residential homes or on farmland, state regulatory and law enforcement entities appear unable to address these potentially CCP-supported grow operations despite their significant threat to local communities across the country.

In addition to growing marijuana, investigators in Oklahoma discovered illicit marijuana growers engaged in human trafficking, sex trafficking, ketamine trafficking, illegal gambling, and international money laundering.²⁰ In November 2022, a Chinese national murdered four people on an Oklahoma marijuana farm after a monetary dispute.²¹ In September 2023, Chinese immigrant workers filed a lawsuit alleging they were lured to Navajo land in New Mexico under

⁸ Robinson, *supra* note 5.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Drew Hutchinson, "Oklahoma Leads Nation in Number of Cannabis Dispensaries," KGOU, February 16, 2020, <https://www.kgou.org/business-and-economy/2020-02-12/oklahoma-leads-nation-in-number-of-cannabis-dispensaries>.

¹¹ Fertig, *supra* note 3.

¹² Josh Dulaney, "Oklahoma Authorities Cracking down on 'Wild West' Marijuana Market," *The Oklahoman*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/crime/2023/11/28/oklahoma-medical-marijuana-authority-illegal-grows-wild-west-weed/71719054007/>.

¹³ Lester Black, "Bay Area Cannabis Grows Linked to Chinese Organized Crime," SFGATE, March 23, 2023, <https://www.sfgate.com/cannabis/article/california-illegal-cannabis-grow-17856215.php>.

¹⁴ Tom Banse, "Massive Illegal Pot Grow in Western Washington Allegedly Has Connections to China," Northwest News Network, December 1, 2017, <https://www.nwnewsnetwork.org/crime-law-and-justice/2017-11-30/massive-illegal-pot-grow-in-western-washington-allegedly-has-connections-to-china>.

¹⁵ KTVZ, "CO Drug Agents Dismantle Large Chinese Cartel Marijuana Operation in Six Jefferson County Raids," KTVZ News, June 15, 2022, <https://ktvz.com/news/crime-courts/2022/06/15/c-o-drug-agents-dismantle-large-chinese-cartel-marijuana-operation-in-six-jefferson-county-raids-five-arrests/>.

¹⁶ Stephanie Barry, "Three Million in Marijuana Seized in Savoy, MA," MassLive, August 7, 2020, <https://www.masslive.com/news/2020/08/3-million-in-marijuana-seized-in-savoy-police-say-feds-say-chinese-nationals-setting-up-large-grow-operations-in-rural-western-massachusetts.html>.

¹⁷ Michael Martin, "A Prolific Black Market Marijuana Broker: Fed Bust Alleged Money Laundering, Illicit Cannabis Ring," WXMI - West Michigan News, May 11, 2023, <https://www.fox17online.com/news/local-news/a-prolific-black-market-marijuana-broker-feds-bust-alleged-money-laundering-illicit-cannabis-ring>.

¹⁸ Kenzie Margiott, "Massive Illegal Marijuana Grow Raided near Gardnerville, NV," KRN News, September 23, 2021, <https://mynews4.com/news/local/massive-illegal-marijuana-grow-raided-near-gardnerville>.

¹⁹ Sam Tabachnik, "Black Market Marijuana Grows Are Popping up Faster than Law Enforcement Can Take Them down. but Is Legalization the Cause?," *The Denver Post*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/06/20/black-market-marijuana-colorado-chinese-crime-rings/>.

²⁰ Dulaney, *supra* note 12.

²¹ Sean Murphy, "Man Charged with Killing 4 Workers at Oklahoma Marijuana Farm," AP News, December 5, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-shootings-marijuana-homicide-oklahoma-f6922f0e9b96cac4b25867bf698be6e9>.

false pretenses and then forced to work 14-hour days on an illicit marijuana farm.²² In Northern California and Oregon, Chinese, Russian, Mexican, and Bulgarian cartels hold victims of human trafficking and force them to work on marijuana farms.²³ These human trafficking victims suffer inhumane conditions and are sometimes sexually abused or otherwise exploited in addition to forced labor.²⁴ This issue is not limited to the illegal cultivation and distribution of marijuana. Allowing illicit marijuana farms tied to the CCP is a continued threat to national security, public safety, and human rights.

We respectfully ask the DOJ for a briefing on this subject at the earliest possible opportunity, but no later than February 23, 2024. This briefing should include, at minimum, answers to the following questions:

1. Has the DOJ devoted resources to investigating the CCP's involvement in illicit marijuana farms in the United States, to include financial support, management, and distribution? If so, has DOJ prosecuted any individuals found to have direct ties to the CCP?
2. How many CCP-affiliated marijuana farms are you aware exist in the United States? Are there others you are uncertain of?
3. How has state legalization of marijuana affected the proliferation of CCP-affiliated marijuana farms?
4. How much revenue do CCP-affiliated marijuana farms in the United States generate? How much of this revenue is sent back to China and through what mechanism?
5. How many CCP-affiliated marijuana farms have obtained state-issued licenses to grow marijuana, either directly or through a shell company?
6. How many American banks offer financial services to CCP-affiliated marijuana farms? What is the nature of these services?
7. Does the federal government need additional authorities to identify and shut down illicit CCP-affiliated marijuana farms?

This matter is critical to the safety of American communities and to national security. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Pete Sessions
Member of Congress




Joni K. Ernst
United States Senator


²² Susan Montoya Bryan and Rio Yamat, "Chinese Immigrant Workers Sue over Forced Labor at Illegal Marijuana Operation on Navajo Land," AP News, September 28, 2023, apnews.com/article/navajo-marijuana-farms-chinese-workers-trafficking-lawsuit-4b2387e2bb6d9645bf2f2e8c81482281.

²³ Warren, supra note 1

²⁴ Id.



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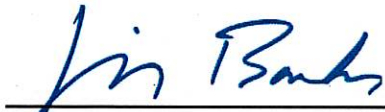

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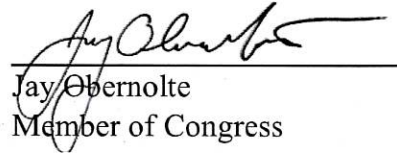
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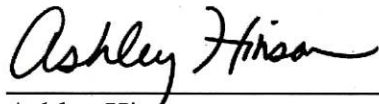
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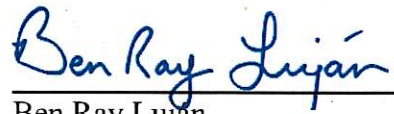
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