

## Is that joint damaging our environment?

By Kathryn R. Phillips 5:05 p.m. April 23, 2015

There's a harvest taking place in the nooks and crannies of public and private lands all over California. It threatens the survival of everything from the imperiled spotted owl and steelhead trout to the fisher, a small mammal in the weasel family that is struggling for survival.

These harms aren't caused by the scourge of clearcutting forests. And chances are high that, if you live in a Western state, your friends and neighbors have helped to create the market that inspired these damaging practices.

High, that is, if they have recently purchased marijuana.

Marijuana is a hot topic in policy circles these days, particularly in states like Colorado, Oregon, Washington and Alaska, all of which have legalized its sale for recreational use.

In California, nearly 20 years of legalized medical marijuana has created a market in the Golden State that makes it possible for just about any adult to access pot legally with limited effort, and our state produces much of the nation's marijuana.

While public debates revolve around concerns about the social, political and moral implications of making marijuana more widely available here, precious little has been said about the environmental impacts associated with this production boom. Both legal and illicit marijuana production are creating dire consequences for the state's natural areas.

The most irresponsible – and usually illicit – producers burrow into private and public lands, including many of the best state park lands. They use heavy equipment to clear cut acres of trees and then set up their plantings. These growers devastate the landscape and make outdoor recreation risky for hikers and field scientists who might stumble across them.

They illegally siphon irrigation water out of streams that should be providing habitat for amphibians and migratory fish like steelhead and salmon.

Many also use heavy pesticides to control the plants and animals that dare to cross their wilderness paths. In some areas of the state, as much as 90 percent of the rare fisher population has been exposed to toxics associated with marijuana production. Some growers have also deliberately poisoned black bears and bobcats that get in their way.

Sometimes clandestine commercial grows are discovered and shut down. They leave behind waste and destruction. According to the U.S. Forest Service, a single illegal marijuana grow site on public lands can devastate an area of up to 50 acres. Between

2005 and 2013 more than 3,300 of such sites were found on National Forest System lands in California alone.

In fiscal year 2013, the Forest Service collected nearly 119,000 pounds of trash, more than 80 miles of tubing, 244 propane tanks, 61 car batteries, 17,000 pounds of fertilizer, almost 40 gallons of liquid pesticides and more than 5 gallons of banned poisons from National Forest grow sites in California.

Unfortunately, there isn't much to ensure that the legal growers are doing better in their farming practices on private lands. The legal medical marijuana growers have had virtually no regulatory oversight to protect land and water from sloppy growing practices or unpermitted water diversions.

This year, there are several bills in the Legislature designed to regulate marijuana. A measure to fully legalize marijuana is expected to be on the 2016 ballot.

To be clear, Sierra Club California does not have a position on the legalization of marijuana. But we are strongly in favor of taking steps to ensure that future marijuana policy is accompanied by stringent environmental protections.

Any ballot initiative or legislation that calls for legalization must recognize the unsavory environmental byproducts associated with California's current production boom and establish both regulations to stop the environmental damage and funding streams to restore blemished wild lands. Legal growers need guidance on best environmental management practices and then must be strictly held to those practices. Illegal grows on wild lands need to be aggressively shut down.

With or without new levels of legalization, marijuana consumers need to heighten their awareness.

The influence of purchasing power has pushed other farming operations toward more ethical and environmentally responsible practices in products ranging from coffee and chocolate to meat and eggs. Consumers should also demand that the marijuana they buy is produced in a manner that does not kill wildlife, destroy wild lands, spew tons of toxic pesticides and illegally suck up sensitive water supplies. With California's persistent drought, the stakes are simply too high to ignore these harmful practices.

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