



Keeping Safe If You Come Across a Marijuana Grow Site

Bob Beckley, Project Leader

Although growing marijuana (figure 1) on public lands is illegal, hidden marijuana grow sites are becoming more common. Years ago, marijuana was illegally planted on small patches of national forest. The marijuana was intended for personal use or small-scale distribution. Usually, the grow sites were small and unattended.

Today, marijuana production on national forest lands poses substantial risks to employees, the public, and the environment. Many of the marijuana operations on public lands are associated with organized crime. The potential for violent confrontations is high.

Forest Service employees who have entered areas where marijuana was being grown have been confronted, threatened, and shot at by armed growers. Growers have killed people they felt were threatening their grow sites or their security.

Highlights...

- Marijuana grow sites are not legal on public land, but they're becoming more common.
- Forest Service employees need to be able to recognize the signs of a marijuana grow site.
- If you realize you are near a grow site:

**Be Quiet and Leave
the Area Immediately!**



Figure 1—A mature marijuana plant with buds (top photo), the most potent part of the plant. The bottom photo shows the plant when it is not in bud.

This tech tip includes basic safety information for Forest Service employees who inadvertently come across a marijuana grow site (figure 2).



Figure 2—If you find a marijuana grow site on national forest lands, leave the area.

Marijuana Is Big Business

A pound of marijuana may sell for thousands of dollars, depending on its strain and quality. Because marijuana plants are worth so much, growers have resorted to extreme measures to protect their crops from theft or confiscation by authorities.

Today's marijuana is not the same as that grown in years past. Many operations on public lands use genetically altered plants that produce a potent product in a short growing season. Some plants no longer look like the traditional marijuana plant and may grow in areas where unaltered plants would not have grown.

When you're working in remote locations, your survival may depend on your ability to identify signs of a marijuana grow site (figure 3) and leave the area before you have been seen.



Figure 3—Most marijuana grow sites have camps nearby with kitchens and sleeping areas.

What To Look For

In national forests, marijuana grow sites tend to be planted in areas where visitors are unlikely. Southern or western slopes are preferred, but grow sites can be found in any type of terrain or on any aspect. Sometimes grow sites are planted along roads or freeways on steep hillsides where brush and trees hide the marijuana plants.

Forest Service employees working in the field or fighting fires may enter areas where marijuana is being grown. The dangers of encountering marijuana growers or entering a grow site cannot be overemphasized.

Be aware of your surroundings. Look for signs of human activity in isolated areas. If you suspect you may be near a marijuana grow site, be quiet and leave the area immediately—do not go any farther.

Signs of a Marijuana Grow Site

Informal, unmarked, hiking trails may be a sign that you are approaching a grow site. Other signs include:

- PVC (plastic) pipes, hose lines, drip irrigation lines, cisterns, gardening supplies, or gardening tools.
- Containers for fertilizers, insecticides, and animal poisons (figure 4).
- Signs of established camping, cooking, and sleeping areas.
- Structures in remote locations.
- Trash or garbage in remote locations—especially if the trash contains canned goods or other heavy items not common in the backcountry.

- Propane bottles or tanks. Growers use propane to avoid smoke from campfires.
- Sights or sounds of human activity in remote forest areas.
- People sitting on cutbanks or hillsides along forest roads. They may be growers waiting for food drops or supplies.
- Food cached near trailheads or alongside roads.
- Individuals with firearms when hunting seasons are closed.
- Pungent strong odor. Marijuana plants can have a strong smell, especially on hot days.
- Signs of cultivation or soil disturbance in forested areas.
- Areas cleared of brush or timber, especially in isolated areas.
- Paper cups, chicken wire, or plastic sheets. These are often used for starting and protecting plants.



Figure 4—Do not drink water from irrigation systems in marijuana grow site or wash with the water—it may contain toxic pesticides or fertilizer.

Coming Across a Marijuana Grow Site

Entering a marijuana grow site or encountering growers could cost you your life. Your best defense is to be aware of your surroundings and retreat immediately if you think you are near a grow site.

Some sites may also be protected by sophisticated monitoring and detection systems or by deadly booby traps (such as explosives triggered by trip wires). Growers frequently have observation points where they can view the grow site and the surrounding area. Growers may know you are approaching long before you are aware of the dangers that may confront you (figure 5).

Do Not Enter a Marijuana Grow Site!



Figure 5—Increasingly, automatic and semiautomatic weapons are being found at marijuana grow sites on national forest lands.

Most marijuana grow sites on national forest lands have someone watching 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even unattended sites pose a significant risk. Marijuana grow sites may have a variety of chemicals for pest and animal control, including chemicals that may be so hazardous they are illegal in the United States. These toxins may be in the leaves and buds of marijuana plants. Insects, rodents, and animals may die if they eat these plants.

If You Come Across a Marijuana Grow Site

Do not enter the area. Quietly leave the same way you came in.

Don't

- Look around or explore.
- Take a sample.
- Take a GPS location while you are in the grow site.
- Use your camera, radio, or cell phone while you are in the grow site.

Do

- Return to your vehicle (figure 6) and leave as soon as possible.
- Call your dispatch office and report your location when you are a safe distance away and sure you are not being watched (figure 7). Do not mention the grow site on the radio.
- Return to your duty station.
- Report your finding to Forest Service law enforcement as soon as possible.



Figure 6—Park your vehicle so you can leave quickly if you need to.



Figure 7—Keep in contact with your dispatcher. Carry your Forest Service radio and extra batteries at all times.

Prepare for the Field

Forest Service employees frequently work in remote and isolated locations where radio or cell phone contact may be limited and help could be hours away. Let others know where you are going before you leave for the field.

Good practices to follow, especially if you're working in areas that might have marijuana grow sites, include:

- Check with local law enforcement officers to see whether they know of any dangers or concerns in the area where you will be working.
- Establish and follow check-in and checkout procedures every day.
- Make sure your supervisor and the dispatch office know where you will be working.
- Agree on a phrase that you would use to let your dispatcher know you are in danger and need law enforcement assistance immediately at your last known location.
- Make sure you have a working radio and extra batteries.
- Use the buddy system. Work in pairs.
- Make sure that others can tell you are a Forest Service employee by wearing a Forest Service uniform or a hardhat with Forest Service logo, a cruiser's vest, or fire clothes. You should have your Forest Service identification.
- Check in with your dispatcher when you arrive at your work location, letting the dispatcher know where you

park your vehicle. Check in again when you get to your work site, letting your dispatcher know when you will be leaving.

- Park your vehicle so it's pointing in the direction of escape.
- Let your dispatcher know when you're leaving the work site and where you're heading.
- Don't take side trips without letting your dispatcher know where you are and where you're going.

A poster showing the signs of marijuana grow sites, "Keep Off the Grass," is available at <http://fsweb.mtdc.wo.fs.fed.us/pubs/htmlpubs/htm10672317/images/poster.jpg>

Additional information on safety in remote locations is available on a DVD produced by the Missoula Technology and Development Center (MTDC), "Personal Safety in Remote Work Locations" (0867-2D01-MTDC). The DVD includes four modules ranging from 20 to 40 minutes long on "General Awareness," "Supervisor Responsibilities," "Avoiding Trouble," and "Building Trust in Small Towns." The DVD can be ordered by calling MTDC at 406-329-3978.



About the Author

Bob Beckley received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Montana in 1982. He began his Forest Service career as a timber technician for the Nez Perce National Forest. Beckley was a smokejumper when he came to the Missoula Technology and Development Center in 1990. He assists in the explosives program and works as a project leader and public affairs specialist.



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Marijuana grow sites are becoming more common on public lands, including national forests. Forest Service employees need to recognize the signs of these sites so they can leave quickly if they are near one. This tech tip provides advice to help Forest Service employees avoid marijuana grow sites and to help keep themselves safe if they do come across one.

Keywords: gardens, hazardous materials, illegal drugs, national forests, pot, safety at work



Electronic copies of MTDC's documents are available on the Internet at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/eng/t-d.php>

For additional information about keeping safe if you come across a marijuana grow site, contact Bob Beckley at MTDC:

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Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management employees can search a more complete collection of MTDC's documents, CDs, DVDs, and videos on their internal computer networks at:

<http://fsweb.mtdc.wo.fs.fed.us/search/>



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