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Domestic Marijuana Eradication 2000 Annual Report

INTRODUCTION

Florida's **Domestic Marijuana Eradication (DME) Program**, which began in 1981, is responsible for the eradication of over 2 million cannabis plants and the arrest of over 7,000 cultivators. The program concluded its twentieth year in 2000 with the eradication of over 39,000 cultivated cannabis plants.

Since 1981, Florida has been recognized by the law enforcement community, as well as *High Times* magazine, an outlaw drug culture publication, as one of the nation's leading producers of "homegrown" marijuana. Florida's warm climate and extensive areas of rural, fertile woodlands provide an ideal environment for the cultivation of marijuana as a profitable criminal venture.

By removing the cannabis plant "raw product" before packaging and smuggling, valuable law enforcement resources are maximized, and the level of officer safety is greatly increased. The DME program, much like the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) earlier "*Operation Snow Cap*," is a cost effective, measurable crime prevention program. The eradication of this raw product immediately impacts drug violators by reducing the availability of processed marijuana on our streets. The efforts and successes of Florida's DME "internal drug interdiction" program are a positive far reaching statement to drug source nations demonstrating our commitment to fight this battle on all fronts. Further, the emphases placed on the DME program sends a clear message to Floridians that our law enforcement community is committed to battling this dangerous gateway drug.

Through continuous evaluation of law enforcement efforts, the program has evolved into a highly effective weapon in combating marijuana cultivators statewide. The DME program involves all of Florida's law enforcement community by employing aggressive training techniques in the specialized areas of aerial detection and indoor grow investigations. Task force operations have been formed to combat cultivation problems identified in regional assessments. These task force operations have accounted for impressive results statewide.

In 2000, cultivated marijuana was identified in 61 of Florida's 67 counties. DME efforts resulted in the detection of 611 grow sites, the arrest of 406 marijuana cultivators, and the eradication of 39,219 plants, thus eliminating a potential of over 39,000 pounds of marijuana from illegal consumption.

Indoor grow operations were detected and dismantled in 39 Florida counties in 2000. The DME program has uncovered 1,873 indoor grow operations since 1989. The success of Florida's attack on the indoor grow cultivator is a result of thorough investigations and the spirit of cooperation shared by all agencies involved in the DME program. This success is also attributed to Florida's progressive training program targeting indoor grow operations.

("Operation Snow Cap" was a DEA program which targeted cocaine processing laboratories in South America in order to prevent the finished product from being introduced onto U.S. streets, where it is much harder to eliminate.)

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Prior to the DME program, domestically cultivated marijuana in Florida was not recognized as a problem by most of Florida's law enforcement agencies. However, in 1981 a source provided information to the FDLE Panama City Field Office that cultivation was a viable criminal enterprise in the state. That same year, FDLE members met with representatives from the DEA, and the first marijuana eradication effort in Florida was initiated, resulting in the seizure of 48,206 marijuana plants and 61 arrests.

The Florida program has set national standards in providing specialized training in the areas of aerial detection and indoor grow investigations. During 2000, FDLE delivered training for federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies supporting the national eradication effort. Through this progressive training program and the sharing of information, the state has established a national reputation as a leader in this field, and promotes lasting contacts with other law enforcement agencies.

For several years FDLE and local agencies received information that Florida growers were moving across state lines to avoid detection. In 1999 the impact of the DME program was exemplified in the Florida Panhandle when intelligence sources for FDLE led to the arrest of a cultivator from Holmes County in Georgia. In 2000, three (3) Florida cultivators were arrested after detecting the grow operations had been moved across the Florida line.

Funding from the DEA supports Florida's DME program. Coordination, manpower, and equipment are provided by FDLE with support from other state law enforcement agencies, police departments, sheriff's offices, and the Florida National Guard.

The Florida National Guard has played an integral role in the eradication of marijuana by providing helicopter flight hours and special force missions. The timely and professional support of the Florida National Guard is a critical component in the overall success of the DME program. Additionally, mission support has been provided by the Florida Wing of the Civil Air Patrol, thus enhancing the statewide eradication effort.

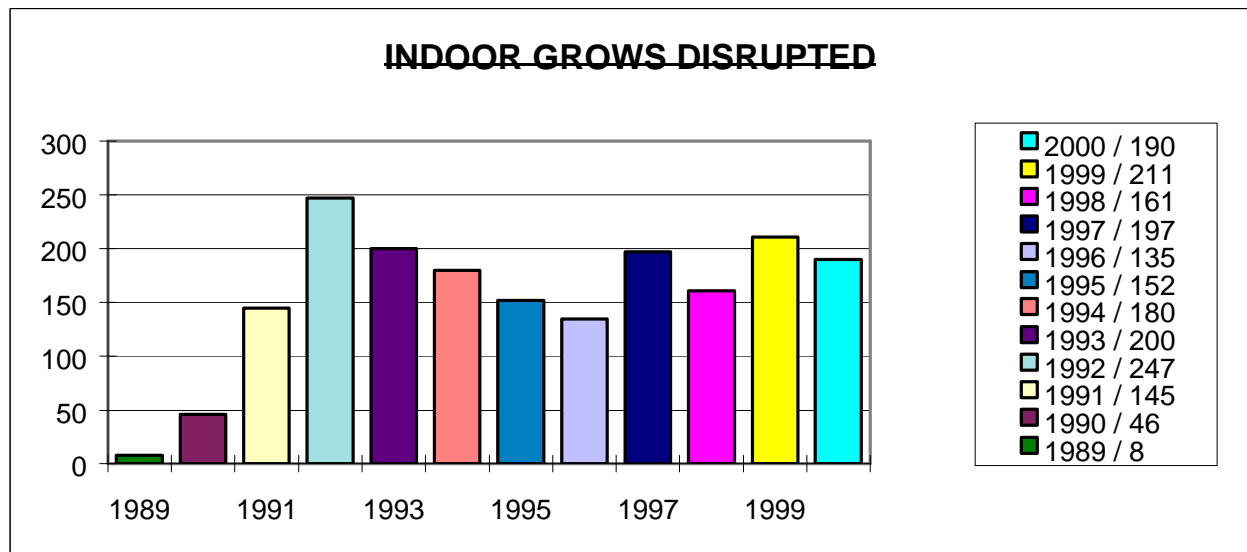
HISTORICAL DATA

<u>Year</u>	<u>Plants Eradicated</u>	<u>Growing Sites</u>	<u>Arrests</u>	<u>Estimated Value</u>
1981	48,206	No Record	61	\$18.0 Million
1982	43,500	341	149	\$16.3 Million
1983	139,707	903	286	\$52.3 Million
1984	106,645	769	426	\$40.0 Million
1985	104,281	1,272	329	\$39.0 Million
1986	97,408	1,332	333	\$36.5 Million
1987	96,842	1,498	335	\$36.3 Million
1988	134,794	1,568	358	\$50.4 Million
1989	79,176	1,153	259	\$79.1 Million
1990	92,901	1,148	330	\$92.9 Million
1991	105,066	1,801	690	\$105.1 Million
1992	243,452	1,893	784	\$243.4 Million
1993	145,384	2,033	696	\$145.3 Million
1994	99,862	1,406	501	\$99.8 Million
1995	102,075	1,260	437	\$102.0 Million
1996	96,661	1,059	362	\$96.6 Million
1997	108,178	1144	477	\$108.1 Million
1998	55,311	604	404	\$55.3 Million
1999	56,838	573	466	\$56.8 Million
2000	39,219	611	408	\$39.2 Million

LAW ENFORCEMENT STRATEGIES

Aerial detection techniques developed in the early years of the program have been very successful and continue to be a vital part of the eradication effort. Other techniques such as investigations, ground searches, and the use of informational sources have also been utilized to counter this illegal activity. The involvement of the Florida National Guard in aerial surveillance and eradication ground support has complemented Florida's program. In addition, the use of regional task force operations used to combat the cultivation of marijuana was effective in 2000, and is recommended for the 2001 program. By combining investigative expertise, resources, and manpower, multi-agency task forces were able to efficiently concentrate on areas of high activity without draining the resources of any one agency.

From 1989 to 2000, the emphasis of the DEA national Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program (DCE/SP) shifted from plants eradicated to offender arrest and asset forfeiture. Following this evolution, the DME program has continually strived to provide the most current training. Recently, emphasis has been placed on the use of thermal imagery technology to detect and apprehend the sophisticated indoor cultivator. Historically, sheriff's offices have received the majority of training in the areas of marijuana cultivation. With the increase of indoor grow operations; members from municipal police departments have attended this training. Their participation has resulted in detection of a greater number of indoor grow operations and an increase in related arrests. Aerial detection schools, which were developed in 1990, will be continued. These schools have generated a larger pool of potential spotters and increased the number of plants eradicated in the regions hosting the training.



LAW ENFORCEMENT STRATEGIES - Continued

FLDE has routinely received federal funds, dispensing them among participating agencies. In 2000, FDLE received \$320,000 in federal funds from DEA. These funds supported and defrayed the costs incurred by state and local law enforcement as a result of the marijuana eradication efforts and were exclusive of any salary dollars. Costs supported by this program included aircraft rental and operation, vehicle rental and fuel, operating supplies, the purchase of surveillance equipment, and travel.

Support from an informed public combined with law enforcement efforts is essential to the success of both the DCE/SP and DME program. To ensure this success, FDLE initiated and continues an ongoing public awareness effort through the use of the Internet, educational appearances, publication of documents, and training provided to the law enforcement members of this state. FDLE also maintains a toll free telephone "hot-line" (1-800-342-SPOT) for citizens to report suspicious activity relating to domestic marijuana operations as well as other drug activity.

PLANT PRODUCTION AND QUALITY

Marijuana, like many other illegal drugs, is generally sold by weight. Law enforcement officials use a plant count as the primary unit of measurement. Plant count represents cash potential at maturity regardless of plant size when seized and destroyed. It also eliminates inconsistent value assessments resulting from variations in stages of plant growth and the loss of weight as the plant dries.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (Delta-9 THC) is the primary psychoactive component in the marijuana plant. Flowering tops and leaves of the plant are known as the colas or buds and contain the highest THC levels of the plant material. In 1980, commercial grade marijuana THC levels averaged 1.8%. Today the average commercial grade marijuana THC level is 3.2%. With this dramatic increase in the narcotic content of marijuana today, it is easy to see that law enforcement is dealing with a new and more potent drug.

Attempts to improve quality and productivity in marijuana cultivation were evident in 2000. Techniques such as hybridization, sinsemilla production, sophisticated fertilization, watering systems, water pumps at remote sites, and the utilization of the progressive grow (a cultivation technique that produces multiple crops in succession) produced a superior product in Florida. Samples collected from various sites throughout the year were submitted to the University of Mississippi Cannabis Project for analysis. Results of these tests indicated that the grade of domestically produced marijuana in Florida far exceeds the quality of marijuana of foreign origin in past years.

Sinsemilla, is a cultivation technique that uses only un-pollinated female plants, which produce even higher THC levels than commercial grade marijuana. THC levels in sinsemilla averaged in the 6% range ten years ago. Today, sinsemilla THC levels commonly exceed the 12% range nationally. In 1999, a sample of sinsemilla taken from an indoor grow operation in Sunrise, Florida was discovered to have a THC level of 26.8%. Today, this THC level is the highest ever-recorded in Florida.

Sinsemilla production is more labor intensive because it requires the removal of all male plants from the field to keep pollination from occurring. As a result, the cultivator must spend more time with the plants, thus increasing the risk of apprehension.

The sophisticated indoor cultivator utilizes cloning techniques to ensure a sinsemilla crop each time. Thus guaranteeing the quality of the product being sold. Cloning is a technique that takes cuttings from a source plant and uses them to produce duplicate plants. This technique allows the cultivator to produce consistently high quality marijuana, which is priced accordingly. Prices for today's sinsemilla product have soared as high as \$6,000 per pound.

TRENDS

The methods used by marijuana cultivators to avoid detection and increase production are constantly evolving. Growers are planting smaller, widely dispersed plots to avoid detection and increase production. The motto of the grower is “one for the rip-offs, one for the police, and one for profit.” The outdoor growers will clear, till, plant, fertilize, and harvest just as farmers of small legitimate “backyard” crops do. The difference is in the extreme measures the marijuana growers use to conceal and protect the potential cash value of this illegal crop. Growers prefer to insulate themselves from prosecution and civil forfeiture by using lands they do not own, such as public woodland areas or timberland. The plots are usually located close to a water source, with watering systems ranging from small solar powered pumps to shallow hand dug wells.

Marijuana production in Florida spans the entire state from the sophisticated indoor grow operations of South Florida to the isolated woodlands of the Panhandle. Because of a temperate climate, abundant wetlands, and evolution of indoor grows, the State of Florida offers an enhanced opportunity for profits from marijuana cultivation. In 2000, the central and southern regions of Florida produced the majority of the outdoor marijuana crops seized. Orange County seized the most outdoor cultivated plants with 6,002. Last year 190 indoor grow operations were discovered statewide. Broward and Dade Counties led the state in uncovering indoor grow operations for the 2000 effort, followed closely by Orange County. The highest number of indoor grow operations detected was 20 in Broward County, followed by 14 in Dade County, and 13 in Orange County.

Outdoor cannabis production was down for the third straight year. A combination of rainfall deficit and aggressive aerial detection mission in areas historically high in production has effectively reduced the opportunity for the cultivators. Evidence of the success of the aerial detection missions was again realized in 2000 when three Florida cultivation organizations moved their operations across the state line.

Violence associated with marijuana cultivation continues to be a concern for law enforcement and the recreational users of public lands. In California, incidents of violence associated with marijuana cultivation are on the rise. Northern California is experiencing an influx of heavily armed Mexican Cultivation Cartels that pose a threat to the state’s recreational users and law enforcement. In 1999 a Hardee County outdoor grow operation was discovered with 18,248 plants being guarded 24 hours a day by armed Mexican Nationals. This incident is unusual because most outdoor grows encountered in Florida are camouflaged, with the cultivator visiting the site as crop attention dictates. This incident should serve notice to Florida eradication teams to be ever vigilant of possible armed encounters when investigating outdoor grows. The 2000 DME effort did not find any further evidence of a large-scale armed operation.

Historically, Florida has not experienced a significant problem with booby traps or violence associated with marijuana cultivation. A consistent decline in incidents of violence associated with cultivation has occurred since Florida’s DME program has emphasized offender arrests. In 2000, there were no incidents of violence or booby traps reported in connection with cultivation activity. However, 128 firearms were seized from the 611 grow sites detected in 2000. Therefore, Florida law enforcement cannot become complacent.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Florida has continued an ongoing interdiction of cultivated marijuana in its communities for twenty (20) years. The cultivation of outdoor marijuana in 2000 was the lowest recorded since the inception of the DME program in 1981. A combination of below average rainfall for the past three years and effective aerial detection missions contributed to this welcomed drop in marijuana production. The number of indoor grow operations detected in the 2000 DME effort was again impressive. This is a direct result of Florida's DME training program and the efforts of highly skilled investigators pursuing the indoor cultivators.

This year's expanded use of regional task force operations was very successful. These operations were an outstanding example of what can be achieved when agencies combine resources for a common goal. With the knowledge gained, it is anticipated that regional task force operations will again play a major role in the suppression of marijuana cultivation in 2001.

An evaluation of the 1999 training program revealed that additional instruction was needed in the area of aerial detection. Schools targeting the investigation of indoor grows were determined to be sufficient. The 2000 DME program addressed this need with an additional aerial detection school and one indoor grow investigations school.

The DME program orientations will be planned for April 2001, and the needs for training will be evaluated by all law enforcement agencies involved in the eradication effort.

With the coordinated efforts of federal; state, and local law enforcement, including the Florida National Guard; suppression of this drug-manufacturing problem should again prove to be successful in the coming year.

APPENDIX I

COUNTY STATISTICS

COUNTY	ERADICATED PLOTS	PLANTS ERADICATED	INDOOR GROWS	ARRESTS
ALACHUA	22	2385	12	21
BAKER	12	635	1	3
BAY	11	83	3	12
BRADFORD	4	449	0	0
BREVARD	12	481	3	7
BROWARD	20	1753	20	25
CALHOUN	0	0	0	0
CHARLOTTE	1	8	0	0
CITRUS	4	68	2	2
CLAY	7	257	0	14
COLLIER	12	1618	9	11
COLUMBIA	4	1321	0	1
DADE	14	1834	14	17
DESOTO	7	67	0	6
DIXIE	8	105	1	4
DUVAL	25	610	10	19
ESCAMBIA	6	312	3	7
FLAGLER	3	30	1	1
FRANKLIN	4	39	1	2
GADSDEN	5	68	0	0
GILCHRIST	7	632	2	4
GLADES	0	0	0	0
GULF	4	22	0	4
HAMILTON	6	1874	0	3
HARDEE	0	0	0	0
HENDRY	0	0	0	0
HERNANDO	22	166	3	10
HIGHLANDS	4	59	0	2
HILLSBOROUGH	10	553	8	13
HOLMES	8	529	0	4
INDIAN RIVER	16	465	7	10
JACKSON	12	882	0	5
JEFFERSON	6	142	0	5

APPENDIX I - Continued**COUNTY STATISTICS**

COUNTY	ERADICATED PLOTS	PLANTS ERADICATED	INDOOR GROWS	ARRESTS
LAFAYETTE	1	42	0	1
LAKE	14	807	5	9
LEE	0	0	0	0
LEON	11	581	5	12
LEVY	12	278	2	7
LIBERTY	1	155	0	0
MADISON	3	47	1	0
MANATEE	34	581	10	17
MARION	9	269	2	6
MARTIN	2	117	1	3
MONROE	0	0	0	0
NASSAU	3	66	0	1
OKALOOSA	12	213	4	5
OKEECHOBEE	7	2955	0	1
ORANGE	17	6002	13	18
OSCEOLA	3	19	1	1
PALM BEACH	9	2205	9	10
PASCO	19	375	3	9
PINELLAS	27	353	10	18
POLK	18	40	4	20
PUTNAM	8	531	0	2
SANTA ROSA	22	1047	3	3
SARASOTA	5	380	2	3
SEMINOLE	11	613	6	8
ST. JOHNS	7	708	2	10
ST. LUCIE	6	372	4	6
SUMTER	5	31	1	5
SUWANNEE	1	163	0	1
TAYLOR	16	848	0	1
UNION	3	22	0	2
VOLUSIA	21	668	1	7
WAKULLA	1	65	0	0
WALTON	17	952	1	6
WASHINGTON	10	267	0	2
TOTALS	611	39,219	190	406