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March 10, 2014

The Honorable Patti B. Saris
Chair
United States Sentencing Commission
One Columbus Circle, N.E.
Washington, DC 20002-8002

RE: Environmental impacts of marijuana growing

Dear Judge Saris:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the negative impact of illegal marijuana cultivation on public and private land in Sonoma County. Park land and open space contribute significantly to the health of our County's and region's environmental health, the quality of our drinking water and air, and provide a key driver in our economy. One of the greatest risks to our parks and open space currently is illegal marijuana cultivation. As noted by the U.S. Department of Interior, site operators often contaminate and alter watersheds, clear-cut native vegetation, discard garbage and non-biodegradable materials at deserted sites, create wildfire hazards, and divert natural water courses.

These impacts are exacerbated in California as we are currently in the most significant drought in recorded history, creating a heightened strain on our wild land and threaten species. For example, cultivators often dam streams and redirect the water through plastic gravity-fed irrigation tubing to supply water to individual plants. The high demand for water often impacts small streams and damages downstream vegetation that is dependent on consistent water flow. In addition, toxic chemicals enter and contaminate ground water, pollute watersheds and can kill fish and other wildlife. Moreover, while preparing land for marijuana cultivation, growers commonly clear the forest understory, which allows nonnative plants to supplant native ones, adversely affecting the ecosystem. They also terrace the land--especially in mountainous areas--which results in rapid erosion.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide specific data on the local impacts of marijuana cultivation if this information would make a positive contribution to your advocacy on this topic. Thank you for your leadership in addressing this serious environmental and public safety issue.

Sincerely,

DAVID RABBITT,
Chair and Second District Supervisor
Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

CC: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors