

Marijuana operation impresses officials

by Kelly Thornton and Linda Lou

SAN DIEGO - The recent discovery of the region's most sophisticated underground marijuana-growing operation yet - accessible by hidden elevator and a 65-foot-long concrete-encased tunnel - makes San Diego County growers trendsetters, officials said Wednesday.

Some growers are years ahead of counterparts in Los Angeles and other cities, where potent indoor varieties are grown in urban apartments and suburban homes.

Sophisticated marijuana growing operation housed in underground rooms of Damien Andrews' Santa Ysabel log cabin - DEA photo "San Diego County's on the cutting edge here because that's what they used to do," said federal prosecutor Sherri Walker Hobson, who specializes in drug cases. "Seems like growers (here) are coming up with innovative ways to defeat law enforcement, and this is one of the ways."

Damien Andrews allegedly is one such pioneer. He was arrested last week after a tip led authorities to his remote Santa Ysabel log cabin, where agents seized 454 marijuana plants from underground rooms so complex in construction and detail that agents were impressed.

Marijuana cultivators have had to be resourceful to stay ahead of law enforcement, officials said. Some county growers have graduated from small-scale, in-home operations to large, rural locations to avoid hazards of nosy neighbors, landlords and strong odors.

Outside cities and suburbs, growers found they could go underground and rely on generators to avoid detection from skyrocketing utility bills. But generators are noisy, so some growers steal electricity through sophisticated systems that bypass electric meters.

That allowed the lamps, pumps, fans and other equipment used to grow marijuana to run around the clock without causing high energy bills or the loud noise of a generator.

Hobson, the prosecutor, said tactics are always changing. "I'm sure they'll come up with other things, but they will be caught." he said.

And now there's the Andrews compound:

Authorities said the 34-year-old Encinitas man purchased 39 acres in Santa Ysabel, near Julian, and built a two-story luxury log cabin and detached garage without permits. According to court records, he built an elevator, concealed in a walk-in closet in the garage, which descends about 10 feet below ground and connects to a tunnel that is 65 feet long and 4 feet wide.

The tunnel leads to two rooms measuring 20-by-20 feet, with 8- and 12-foot ceilings. Both rooms were outfitted with irrigation, lighting, electrical and ventilation systems and steel I-beams to reinforce the roof.

What distinguished the operation was the elaborate construction and the ways to hide the operation, DEA spokesman Dan Simmons said.

The cabin was equipped with a sophisticated surveillance system, including mounted infrared cameras with night-vision capabilities. One camera was attached to the top of a pole at the gated entrance of the property. Court records detail that the closed-circuit monitors were inside the log cabin and the underground rooms.

"It was the access that was startling, not necessarily the grow itself," Simmons said. "I've seen meth houses and crack houses, and while closed circuit television was not unusual, this is the first time I've seen it with marijuana."

After receiving tips from confidential sources, agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's Narcotics Task Force and the Internal Revenue Service served search warrants at the property March 28 and seized the plants, according to court records.

Agents arrested Andrews and two alleged accomplices, Anthony Martin Hillerby, 40, of Encinitas and Sean Daniel Smith, 35, of Santa Ysabel. All have pleaded not guilty to conspiracy to manufacture marijuana plants and manufacturing marijuana plants. Smith is scheduled to appear at a bail hearing today, the others on April 19.

Authorities said marijuana grown indoors can sell for \$4,000 to \$5,000 a pound, versus \$300 a pound for the outdoor variety. Depending on a grower's harvesting methods, 454 plants could produce tens of thousands of dollars in profits every few weeks.

On Wednesday, the drug bust was the talk of Santa Ysabel, an isolated community at the junction of highways 78 and 79 with rough terrain and road signs warning of cow crossings.

Residents said they were gossiping and speculating about whether they had run into Andrews or knew the location of his log cabin, which they believed to be in a remote area.

Peter Hoffman of Borrego, 45, was not alarmed or surprised to hear about a marijuana operation nearby. But the elevator and the tunnel?

"I am just surprised that somebody can pull off that scale of operation for being this far out in the middle of nowhere," Hoffman said.

Another resident, Art Fann, 74, put it this way: "It's just part of the world we live in these days."

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