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Enforce environmental regulations on illegal pot growers

Cultivation pollutes streams and forests and damages habitat

Many marijuana growing sites are unregulated

Rules governing medical pot were promised but never enacted

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Pot is killing coho salmon. Trickle by trickle, spring by tiny spring, the cold, clear water these fish need to survive is going to weed.

Illegal marijuana cultivation is widely recognized as an environmental menace, polluting streams and forests with pesticides and damaging wildlife and habitat by bulldozing trees and soil to create grow sites. Less well known are the impacts of water diverted to pot plants and their cumulative effects on coho salmon, Chinook salmon and steelhead trout, all threatened species.

Scott Bauer, who has been documenting these effects as lead author of a [scientific study](#), had bad news when he returned last week from a four-day research trip in Trinity County: The last little dribbles coming out of streams are being diverted for marijuana.

“We’re finding dry streams everywhere – 30 and counting,” said Bauer, a senior environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Seeps, springs and other low-flow water sources typically fill small feeder streams to Redwood Creek, the Eel and other coastal rivers, where ocean-going salmon species start and end their lives. In three of his four study areas, Bauer estimates that water demand for marijuana cultivation is diverting all of the available flow. And more: “People are actually trucking water into grow sites,” he said.

Couple that with California’s fourth-year drought and expand it to an entire watershed? “You’ve lost that whole run of fish,” Bauer said.

He blames an explosion in marijuana production that began with the passage of the [Compassionate Use Act of 1996](#). Like the California Gold Rush, the “green rush” has created a chaos of cultivation by outside growers driven by a crazed fixation on the money to be made. California claimed 49 percent of the nation’s \$2.7 billion pot sales in 2014. Cultivation doubled between 2008 and 2012, and Bauer projects it will double again based on his recent field observations.

Ninety-nine percent of these grows are unregulated: no pesticide permits, no dumping permits and, most important for coho and steelhead, no rights to use or divert the water.

The escalating environmental damage screams for regulation. Many laws are already in place. California has long had a system for permitting water diversions through a division of the State Water Resources Control Board. State biologists like Bauer recently gained increased authority to cite and fine growers for violating minimum stream-flow standards and constructing fish barriers.

Most growers, however, are simply ignoring these regulations, carving pot gardens into the remote hillsides of the so-called [Emerald Triangle](#) and every other backwoods around the state with enough water to support a crop. New regulations, governing licensing, product testing and marketing, were promised when medical marijuana was approved. They simply never materialized.

While recreational pot may be [legalized](#) as soon as 2016, the coho cannot wait.

Marijuana cultivation is a well-established, billion-dollar California industry. It needs to behave like one.

Some growers are collecting rainwater to irrigate their plants and generally taking responsibility for their product's environmental effects. Several cannabis associations are working with Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, and other legislators to create an industrywide regulatory [framework](#) for marijuana cultivation. But the vast majority of pot is farmed by rogue growers whose rape-and-run mentality is destroying streams and threatening to eliminate salmon, steelhead and several frogs species. At a legislative hearing last week, Charlton Bonham, state Fish and Wildlife director, said the department has been contacted 24,000 times in the last year on reports of illegal water usage.

Responsible growers need to champion their industry. They need to stand up for the environment – start a bumper sticker crusade that says “Another pothead for steelhead – and salmon.”

The rest of us need to push legislators to give marijuana cultivation the same environmental scrutiny we apply to logging, gold mining and other extraction industries. We are now aware of the catastrophic effects of dewatered streams on salmon. Let's hope it's not too little too late.

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