

**United States Attorney Melinda Haag
Northern District of California**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**THREE MEN PLEAD GUILTY TO CAUSING SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE BY
CULTIVATING MARIJUANA ON AN ECOLOGICAL RESERVE**

Environmental Damage Found in “Crown Jewel” of Federally Protected Lands

SAN FRANCISCO – Chou Vang, Vang Pao Yang, and Pao Vang of Eureka, Calif. pleaded guilty in federal court in San Francisco yesterday to willfully injuring federal property stemming from a marijuana grow the three men cultivated on protected federal lands, United States Attorney Melinda Haag announced.

In pleading guilty, C. Vang, 52, Yang, 63, and P. Vang, 45, admitted to trespassing on the King Range National Conservation Area in the summer of 2012 where they cultivated and manufactured marijuana. In doing so, the defendants admitted that they caused serious damage to the environment. The defendants caused environmental damage by clearing away trees and vegetation, which created siltation and erosion issues, heavily using fertilizers, and failing to properly dispose of trash. The defendants’ actions affected the surrounding watershed and ecosystem including habitat for four federally listed threatened species.

The King Range National Conservation Area is often referred to as the “crown jewel” of land protected by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and is part of a larger system of national conservation areas, monuments, and reserves protecting nationally-significant landscapes throughout the western United States. Protection of this land stemmed from the 1970 King Range Act which was a multi-year effort to conserve one of the most remote, undeveloped, and primitive coastlines in the continental United States. This area is one of the few, and is the largest coastal wilderness area in the contiguous 48 states and is characterized by an abrupt mountain range rising 4,000 feet directly out of the Pacific Ocean, creating a dramatic landscape of forest, pristine watersheds, and various naturally functioning ecosystems. The area provides habitat for four federally listed threatened species: Chinook salmon, Coho salmon, steelhead, and the northern spotted owl. Visitors come from around the world to experience the unique coastal wilderness qualities. This case highlights the significant environmental problems arising from the illegal cultivation of marijuana on federally-protected lands.

“The environmental harm associated with these illegal grows is wreaking havoc on these pristine ecological resources that the federal government is charged with protecting for the public,” said U.S. Attorney Melinda Haag. “We will continue to prosecute those who use our public lands in Northern California to illegally cultivate marijuana at the expense of the environment.”

All three of the defendants were arrested on September 20, 2012, in the King Range National Conservation Area and made their initial appearance in federal court in Eureka on September 24. The defendants were charged with one count of manufacturing marijuana, in violation of 22 U.S.C. § 841(a)(1) & (1)(B)(iv), and one count of willful injury to federal property, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1361. Under the plea agreement, the defendants pleaded guilty to willful injury to federal property.

All three of the defendants are scheduled for sentencing on July 23, 2014, at 10:00 a.m. before the Honorable Charles R. Breyer, United States District Court Judge, in San Francisco. The maximum statutory penalty for violating 18 U.S.C. § 1361 is ten years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, plus restitution, which the parties agree is \$31,000. However, any sentence following conviction would be imposed by the court after consideration of the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and the federal statute governing the imposition of a sentence, 18 U.S.C. § 3553.

Stacey Geis is the Assistant U.S. Attorney who is prosecuting the case. The prosecution is the result of an investigation by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management into large-scale marijuana cultivation on public lands.

Further Information:

Case #: CR-12-00732 CRB

A copy of this press release may be found on the website of the U.S. Attorney's Office at <http://www.justice.gov/usao/can/index.html>.

Electronic court filings and further procedural and docket information are available at <https://ecf.cand.uscourts.gov/cgi-bin/login.pl>.

Judges' calendars with schedules for upcoming court hearings can be viewed on the court's website at www.cand.uscourts.gov.

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