



# Department of Justice

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

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## **ENVIRONMENTAL CHARGES FILED FOR MARIJUANA GROW ON ECOLOGICAL RESERVE**

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

SAN FRANCISCO - On October 13, 2012, Chou Vang, Vang Pao Yang, and Pao Vang of Eureka made their initial appearances in front of Magistrate Judge Nandor J. Vadas in Eureka after a grand jury returned an indictment charging them with the manufacture of marijuana as well as with willfully causing injury or depredation to federal property, United States Attorney MELINDA HAAG announced. This case highlights the significant environmental problems arising from the illegal cultivation of marijuana on federally-protected lands.

According to the indictment, Mr. Chou Vang, Mr. Pao Yang, and Mr. Pao Vang, 49, 61, and 44 respectively, illegally cultivated and manufactured marijuana in the King Range National Conservation Area. An affidavit filed by a special agent of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in connection with a criminal complaint filed in the same matter alleges that the defendants caused damage to the environment through the cutting of forest and vegetation, water diversions, leveling of slopes, the creation of trails, the introduction of fertilizers, and other pollution such as trash and human waste.

The King Range National Conservation Area is often referred to as the “crown jewel” of land protected by BLM 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.

“The environmental charges here underscore the damage to the environment posed by the large-scale cultivation of marijuana on public lands in California,” said U.S. Attorney Melinda Haag. “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. 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 and are currently out on bond. Bail was set at \$50,000. The defendants’ next scheduled appearance is at 9:30 a.m. on October 31 in front of Magistrate Judge Joseph C. Spero and then at 2:00 p.m. in front of District Judge Charles R. Breyer for an initial appearance.

The maximum statutory penalty for violating Title 21, U.S.C. § 841(a)(1) is 40 years in prison, with a mandatory minimum of 5 years, and a \$5 million fine; for violating Title 18, U.S.C. § 1361, it is ten years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, plus restitution if found appropriate. 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 with the assistance of Rania Ghawi. The prosecution is the result of a longer investigation by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management into large-scale marijuana cultivation on public lands.

*Please note, an indictment contains only allegations against an individual and, as with all defendants, Mr. Chou Vang, Mr. Pao Yang, and Mr. Pao Vang must be presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.*

### **Further Information:**

Case #: CR 12-00732 CRB

A copy of this press release may be found on the U.S. Attorney's Office's website at [www.usdoj.gov/usao/can](http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/can).

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](http://www.cand.uscourts.gov).

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