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Major Drug Trafficking Organizations on US Forest Service lands in Wisconsin and Northern Michigan

“Observations from the Field; why we are unprepared and how we can fix it”

This document contains no classified material or open case material that has not already been publicly released and reported upon.



(b) (6)

US Forest Service
Law Enforcement and Investigations
Region 9

Background on Drug Trafficking Organizations on National Forest lands

“DTO” stands for Drug Trafficking Organization, which are criminal organizations created for the sole purpose of manufacturing and distributing illegal drugs.

In the past we have dealt with individuals, usually from the local community, or occasionally small groups of two or three. This situation is different; these DTO’s are highly organized and are supported by a significant organizational infrastructure. Their operations are larger, much more organized, and more dangerous. Cultivators and security people live inside the grow site in small encampments and they are typically armed.

DTO’s come in many forms (Caucasian, Asian, Mexican, Cuban, and others) and often vary by region. In Wisconsin, much like California and other Western states, we find ourselves dealing with Mexican DTO operations.

Mexican DTO’s began establishing these large grow operations on our public lands after 9/11. In the wake of 9/11, U.S. border security was increased and this made it more difficult to smuggle their product into the country. To counter this, the DTO’s began establishing these growing operations on American soil, closer to their client base and with reduced risk of detection at the border.

The dangers associated with DTO growing operations include, but are not limited to the following:

1. DTO growing sites are typically occupied at all times by cultivators, as well as people responsible for protecting the operation. These people are armed.
2. **Drug traffickers have harmed and threatened innocent civilians and law enforcement. There have been attempts to kidnap civilians and there have been several shootings this year alone.**
3. Some of these grow sites may be booby trapped with early warning or harmful devices.
4. Some DTO activities have caused large forest fires in the past.
5. The amount of resource damage caused by these operations is significant.

Preface

It has been asked how and why we were so ill prepared to address the DTO issue in Michigan and Wisconsin. I think the following story illustrates how we came to our current posture.

On (b) (6) I spoke to Region 9 (b) (6) (b) (6) (b) (6) regarding the emerging threat from Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations. During the conversation I related my thoughts regarding what support would be needed for the upcoming drug season.

The purpose of the call was not to condemn (b) (6) for the lack of resources, though I believed that (b) (6) had mismanaged the regions resources and contributed to the problem. The point of the call was to urge (b) (6) to muster the moral courage necessary to make a stand on this issue and do all (b) (6) could to release current resources and get us the additional resources we needed to protect the public and our employees.

I advised (b) (6) that I had very real and serious safety concerns regarding this issue, and of my fear that someone might be seriously harmed in a DTO site during the upcoming summer. (Our previous sites had been discovered by innocent civilians). Instead of a vow of support, (b) (6) response:

“Sometimes it takes a crisis like that before we react”.

I then asked (b) (6) to “be braver than that” and make sure that we did the right thing before it came to such a tragic scenario.

In the following months (b) (6) denied, ignored, or failed to support requests for additional training, funding, and public education efforts. (b) (6) also disregarded recommendations regarding staffing in DTO targeted areas.

Not only were resources denied or withheld, but there then came an effort by (b) (6) (b) (6) to convince others that the eradication and cultivation numbers in Wisconsin had actually *decreased*. In fact, 2008 brought the first ever discovery of a Mexican Drug Trafficking Organization ever on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF); which brought with it a plant count of over 9,000. In previous years, the eradication count had never exceeded 1,000. In fact, in 2007 the largest site discovered was a traditional “local grower” operation of only 200 plants. It seemed as if (b) (6) had ignored all the intelligence assessments, personal conversations, case reports, and other documents that clearly showed an emerging threat.

In 2008, (b) (6) also disregarded clear DTO activity on state land on the Navarino Wildlife Area in Shawano County, very close to the CNNF. According to (b) (6) (b) (6), since those activities were not on National Forest lands, then they were not our concern and not reportable. While technically true, our involvement and assistance in

the case was imperative; obviously, the DTO's do not recognize boundary lines and it was in our best interest to become involved in the case. Even if we did not become fully involved, we should have at least recognized that this was the second occurrence of such activity in two years and used the case as forewarning. Furthermore, we should have began making preparations to deal with the issue. Instead, it was dismissed as being an issue that we did not have to deal with.

Furthermore, it was well in our authority to become involved. Our authority does not end at the forest border, we are authorized to operate anywhere so long the case has a nexus to NF lands and/or impacts our lands, employees, or programs. The overall DTO issue in Wisconsin is, was, and will be a collective effort; it will require teamwork between federal, state, and local agencies.

Not surprisingly, the same group responsible for the Navarino operations would later establish large and very dangerous operations on the National Forest.

How did we get to this state of ill preparedness? Apathy. Neglect. Nonfeasance.

Essentially, in defiance of our sworn duties and obligations, we buried our heads in the sand and hoped the problem would go away. The Region 9 (b) (6) refused to "rock the boat" and ensure that the problem was addressed at higher levels, instead, (b) (6) tried to ignore and downplay the threat until it couldn't be ignored any longer. By that point, we were, and are, dangerously unprepared to successfully address this issue.

The USFS as a whole also play a part in our current posture. The USFS dedicates a very small percentage of its overall budget to law enforcement which limits our resources to address this issue.

In Fact, for the fiscal year 2010 the overall USFS budget was \$6.1 billion dollars. The LEI budget was a mere \$135 million, or only 3% of the entire budget. Region 9's LEI budget was approximately 10 million which supported 73 law enforcement officers, agents, support staff, managers and all equipment, training and travel costs. In many cases one officer will cover nearly 500,000 acres of land and Special Agents often cover two or three forests at a time; usually these are in different states or at least several hours drive form one another.

These numbers speak for themselves as to where law enforcement ranks on the list of priorities within this agency. This has to change if we are serious about combating the ever growing, and very serious situation involving drug production on USFS lands.

DTO's are new to the Midwest and we must confront them, if not, history and the current crisis in California show us that they will gain a foothold and we will likely never root them out.

These groups are armed, have proven their will to harm civilians and law enforcement, and they cause a great deal of resource damage. They operate in such a prolific manner

that they essentially deny the public use of the lands and deny the USFS the ability to administer these lands as we are obligated to do.

These are not minor marijuana growers, these are drug trafficking organizations that often are involved in many other forms of violence, illegal activity, and drug trafficking. They must be stopped and to this point we have not addressed the issue sufficiently. We have an obligation and duty to do so. The taxpayers pay us to do this very thing; this issue is a perfect example of why we have a law enforcement program in the FS. Our job is to protect the public, our employees, and our natural resources. All of which are threatened by drug trafficking organizations.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to address shortcomings and strengths at the field and management levels regarding our drug enforcement efforts. In order to fully improve and grow, we must admit our failures and learn from them. We must also recognize areas where we were successful and learn to sustain success in those areas.

The purpose of this document is *not* to hide facts or in any way distort our shortcomings. In order to improve, we will need to be highly objective and extremely honest in our evaluations.

The purpose is to help us do better. I sincerely hope it is received in that spirit and is not a cause for animosity or retaliation.

History

A disturbing new trend has emerged regarding Marijuana cultivation and trafficking on National Forest lands. No longer are we dealing with small grow sites operated by local growers.

For this region (Wisconsin and Michigan), it began in 2007 when two Mexican Nationals were arrested operating a 57,571 plant grow site in a Forest Preserve area of Cook County, Illinois. Until that point, Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO's) had *never* established themselves before for cannabis growing operations in the area.

In 2008, the problem had spread; seven grow sites were located in Wisconsin and Michigan that were all multi-thousand plant grows. Operations of this size were *unprecedented* in the Upper Midwest, not just in size, but in terms of operational set up and obvious Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) indications; never before have DTO operations been knowingly present in the region. All indicators suggest a Mexican DTO operating in the Midwest. Summarized information on those sites is as follows, all examples are publicly available:

- **June 2008.** 9,000 plants discovered in a DTO style grow site on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF). Two Hispanic males were

encountered at the site within an encampment. Unfortunately, both suspects were gone on arrival of law enforcement. At the scene, supplies for several weeks and three different types of ammunition were discovered. A great deal of cultivation equipment was also present and seized.

- **September 2008.** Approximately 7,500 plants were seized at three abandoned grow sites in Shawano County, Wisconsin. The sites were located approximately 50 miles from the 9,000 plant site on the CNNF.
- **Summer 2008.** Kenosha County Wisconsin. A DTO style grow of over 5,000 plants was discovered. The encampment, ground preparation, cultivation methods, and cultivation equipment was nearly identical to the scene on the CNNF.
- **Summer 2008.** Walworth County, Wisconsin. A DTO style grow of 5,000 plants was discovered. Scene was nearly identical to the other sites listed above.
- **Summer 2008.** A 4,000 plant grow was discovered in Gladwin, MI
- **Summer/Fall 2009.** A large DTO operation was discovered on the Navareno Wildlife Area in Shawano County, Wisconsin. Several sites were located, thousands of plants were eradicated, and numerous encampments dismantled.

Current Situation

Clearly, as detailed above, a pattern is forming. The problem began in 2008 (Likely it began before that, but we did not discover it until 2008), in Northern Wisconsin and over the last three years it has spread locally and to the rest of the Midwest.

Why? Because we did not significantly address the issue when it started.

For the Hoosier, Ottawa, and Huron-Manistee NF's, this year represents the first time they have ever experienced DTO activity. We are not prepared to confront the issue on this scale in one area, let alone the entire Midwest.

We are not prepared in terms of manpower, training resources for ourselves and local agencies, investigative and operational resources, funding for operational costs, and we are not reasonably allowed to use the media to educate the public on the dangers of these organizations.

We may never have all of the resources that we would like, but apathy and a passive approach to this problem have led to a dangerous level of unpreparedness. We have to keep in mind that these groups are a great danger to our employees and the public; this issue cannot be taken lightly.

Understanding that the DTO problem is on a much larger scale in western states does not alleviate our responsibility to address it here. In many ways, the problem in western states grew because we were initially passive toward the issue there as well.

Many in our organization have openly admitted, and it is well documented, that when this problem arose in western states we did not address it properly. In the absence of any real

enforcement, these DTO's flourished and became emboldened. Eventually, due to these DTO operations, innocent civilians were harmed, law enforcement officers were shot, unbelievable resource damage occurred; parts of our forests became unsafe for visitors, and the drug organizations got richer.

Here in the Upper Midwest, we have an opportunity to address this issue with the full benefit of lessons learned in other regions. We essentially have a second chance and an opportunity to stop the threat before it arises to a crisis level. Unfortunately, it appears that we will make the same mistakes as other regions did at this point, and that we will likely not respond until the problem is bigger than we can handle, which is already happening.

Hopefully, innocent civilians will not be harmed before that happens. Hopefully we will act appropriately before law enforcement officers are harmed and irreversible resource damage occurs. The more we delay our response, the more of a foothold these groups will establish. A great deal of illegal drugs will make it to our streets and the DTO's again will flourish.

Past Failures and Missed Opportunities to Prepare

In order to learn how we can do better and how we need to move forward, we need to discuss how we were put in this posture. The following bullets reflect a number of steps that I took to help us prepare for this issue. You will see that denial, or inaction, was regularly the response from the Regional Office in Milwaukee. Additionally, there are examples that contribute to our passive demeanor on this issue.

I bring these things to light for one reason: to make us better and safer at doing our jobs. The public deserves, demands, and pays for that.

1. **Inaction/Requests Denied.** In (b) (6), I requested additional training resources in the form of training to local agencies on the DTO issue. Specifically, I requested that expert Forest Service LEI personnel from California be brought to train local personnel at a conference in (b) (6). This request was made of me by the (b) (6). This request was at little to no cost to the USFS.

This request was denied for months, then finally approved by (b) (6) after a face to face meeting and additional request. The request then languished in the WO. I repeatedly asked for assistance in getting the request approved, but no action was ever taken.

In (b) (6), I made a final request to the RO for assistance in getting this training approved; I received no assistance, and have yet to get a response and it is now (b) (6). The training date is well passed.

The training never took place and we failed to provide much needed assistance to our partners.

This caused a great lapse in the local authorities understanding of DTO operations and enforcement, but also hurt our relations. Our inaction on this issue gave the appearance that we were inept and unwilling to work with others. They asked for our help because we have expertise in this area and we denied them assistance.

This cannot happen if we are to be successful in our collective DTO effort.

2. Request Denied. *I also requested that I be allowed to travel to (b) (6) This was also denied.*

I had hoped to see firsthand the (b) (6) because they have had recent success in their operations. This was a prime opportunity, at very little cost, to make us better, more effective, and more prepared. Denied.

Ironically, I shared this training idea with another agent in another region who proposed it to (b) (6). The idea was implemented almost immediately.

It seems that we sometimes miss the boat in this region because we take very little consideration in how we can be more proactive; this needs to change.

3. Uninformed/unengaged. *In (b) (6) I sent an Intelligence Report and Assessment to (b) (6) outlining the DTO issues, the support needed, and areas or our effort that needed great improvement. I asked that this assessment be shared with the WO so that we might receive the help we needed.*

I never received any dialogue or feedback from (b) (6) but was later contacted by WO personnel asking me for information on the DTO issue in Wisconsin. I advised that I had prepared a formal and thorough brief that they should already have. I was told that no such report was received.

I was contacted because (b) (6) deferred to me on the issue because (b) (6) was unsure of whether we had DTO's in Wisconsin.

How could the (b) (6) the leader of the regional law enforcement program be unsure of whether there were DTO's in the area. (b) (6) had received numerous reports and Intelligence Assessments on this very issue, and the DTO problem was the subject of multiple conversations with (b) (6). Furthermore, there was an open DTO investigation in (b) (6) region at the time. I personally discussed the matter with (b) (6) numerous times.

There needs to be a more attention to this subject and frankly, a much more proactive philosophy from the (b) (6) on this issue. As the leader of the regional law enforcement, his mentality will be emulated by others.

4. Lacking mission consideration. In (b) (6) I had a discussion with (b) (6) the hiring of a Law Enforcement Officer on the (b) (6). I made known my belief that we were making a mistake by not hiring an experienced officer for that area based on DTO activity and the long process of getting a new officer trained. I stated the importance of having an officer that could (b) (6) due to the dangerous situation there and the pending drug growing season.

This is just another example of how the (b) (6) mentality and decision making process does not include consideration of the DTO issue. There were applicants to fill that position that were experienced in DTO operations, had the requisite basic training, and knew the area.

This particular job posting was in the very heart of past DTO operations; it was imperative that we consider this. Instead, (b) (6) hired someone with no enforcement experience and someone that would not be in place for nearly a year. To this date, that officer has not been to the requisite training that allows (b) (6) to be a part of DTO operations.

(b) (6) position is incredibly valuable to our efforts and (b) (6) is not able to take part. That is not to say that the officer is not a good officer and will be of value in DTO operations some day, but we needed the expertise now and the additional manpower now.

Why would we hire someone for a position that would be barred from taking part in the most significant part of his job? Not just barred by policy, but literally not able to perform for nearly a year, and even then, be still in the learning stages. This particular posting was too important and required a veteran candidate, which existed.

Again, the DTO situation does not seem to factor in to the (b) (6) thought process on many issues; this is detrimental to the effort.

5. Uninformed/unengaged. In (b) (6) well after numerous written reports, emails, personal conversations, intelligence assessments, one "on forest" open DTO case, and a large DTO operation discovered near the CNNF, (b) (6) actually claimed that drug operations on the CNNF were actually decreasing. (b) (6) added that (b) (6) had checked the LEIMARS database and could see no justification that the problem had increased.

I reminded (b) (6) that in one instance alone, an open case in the LEIMARS database, there was a seizure of over 9,000 plants. The largest seizure for the (b) (6) years prior was roughly 2-3 hundred plants. This case was well documented in LEIMARS. From 300 to over 9,000 is clearly a significant increase.

I also reminded the (b) (6) that there was a large DTO investigation ongoing on state land near the National Forest that included numerous sites, suspects, and many cultivation sites. According to the (b) (6) this was not our concern.

I think this illustrates a clear willingness to remain unengaged and uninformed on this very important issue.

I had essentially been telling (b) (6) for months of the severity of the problem and (b) (6) either chose to ignore the reports, was not convinced of their accuracy, or was simply confused.

Our leadership really must be more engaged in the program and issues for us to have any success.

6. Inaction. *On another occasion, we had an excellent opportunity to educate the public on the dangers of DTO operations on public lands when a reporter from EJ Magazine requested an interview to discuss this issue.*

After following the policy to allow the interview to go forward, I was allowed to reply, in writing, to some of the reporter's questions. (b) (6) was to approve the replies and coordinate with the reporter.

My replies languished on his desk for months awaiting approval and coordination.

Instead of an article that could help us in our law enforcement efforts, the reporter wrote a story criticizing the FS for its lack of transparency and inability to keep the public informed.

This was yet another missed opportunity to educate the public and recruit them to our cause. This could have been avoided with some attentiveness on this very important issue.

7. Improper/Negligent Staffing. *From early 2008 until this month I have had investigative responsibility for (b) (6) forests in Michigan and Wisconsin. The span of my coverage area is (b) (6) driving time.*

I covered this large area because the agent (b) (6) thought it was unnecessary to hire an agent (b) (6). (b) (6) told me on more than one occasion that "the numbers don't support having an agent there". However, we had an agent there for over 20 years.

Even after the first DTO case, (b) (6) thought it was efficient for (b) (6) agent to cover (b) (6) states with (b) (6) active cases.

Finally, local politicians and agencies became involved because they were frustrated with the lack of coverage and knew that (b) (6) agent could not effectively cover such a large area.

As one can see, the DTO problem is no longer a problem just for western and southern states. In fact, the issue has now expanded within Wisconsin and Michigan, but also to other parts of the Midwest.

During the 2010 campaign, we did much better but some glaring issues remain that must be addressed. They primarily pertain to funding and mentality:

1. *During surveillance operations in this case, I was advised that (b) (6) was displeased because the surveillance did not immediately produce viable leads. (b) (6) advised that we would not continue to fund operations that did not yield results.*

Surveillance, especially in these cases, is a basic tenet of successful investigations. Surveillance operations call for manpower and they are often fairly expensive. However, they are absolutely crucial.

Fortunately, USFS surveillance teams did eventually observe DTO activity and were able to gather enough information that lead to identifying the primary targets of the case.

This also relates to the lack of budgeting for this issue in previous years; again a lack of prior planning could have severely damaged the mission. Had we planned properly by setting money aside, the financial cost of the surveillance, would have been a minimal burden.

I was disappointed with (b) (6) impatience and lack of determination in this instance. As a law enforcement manager and FS employee, I assumed (b) (6) was aware that surveillance operations were not only critical, but they often call for patience, determination, diligence, and quite honestly, that they are not always successful.

Fortunately, investigative stamina, patience, and experience on the part of the investigative team ruled the day and prevailed.

2. *Initially, the detailing of officers to support the mission was met with inaction in the Regional Office. It was my intent to staff the case with all volunteers. At one point I was not receiving enough volunteers and needed personnel to be ordered to the area to support the mission. That did not happen initially, and when it did we were still lacking to some degree.*

However, when we finally assembled a full team, it was the best team anyone could have asked for. I was thoroughly impressed, humbled, and fully proud of that team.

3. *Another lesson learned was one that I learned as the case agent. Essentially, I tried to do too much. I tried to logistics, tactics, administrative duties, and be the lead investigator. I was finally reined in by a wise LEO and a fellow agent.*

Nevertheless, this was a potentially damaging misstep and we are fortunate that it was quashed early.

4. I should have used the Incident Command System (ICS) to a much greater degree. We established a good coalition of other federal and local agencies to assist in the case, but that only increased the need for ICS. I did not use it the system to its potential and recognize that. I have since requested DR Seefeldt to arrange a law enforcement specific training class for future operations.

Although I truly believe that the failures and squandered opportunities of previous years left the public and our employees extremely vulnerable in 2010, this year's campaign was much improved.

It seems that the DTO issue in 2010 became so significant that it could no longer be ignored by the RO. Also, we had so many other agencies involved that it did not allow us to be unsupportive.

Some areas we showed great improvement and should sustain include the following:

1. Our field personnel. The agents and officers that assisted in this case were nothing short of the consummate professionals. They endured hours and days sitting in the heat in the woods fighting insects, fighting boredom, spending time away from family (Most of these officers had duty stations on forests in other states), they placed themselves in harm's way while surveilling dangerous and armed criminals, they worked long hours, got very little sleep, and in several instances were asked to do things that were well outside their comfort zone and training. Not once was there a complaint. The common theme was "I came here to work". The "can-do" attitude was an inspiration.

2. RO Support. Once the magnitude of the situation was realized by the RO, I have to admit, I received all the support I needed. That level of cooperation and support made a huge difference in this case.

I regret the inaction on the issue for the two previous years because we might have curtailed this problem earlier.

3. Integration. The relations that were built between LEI and the forest staff were invaluable. The DR on the Lakewood/Laona Ranger District was crucial to keeping our tactical operational security and the safety of our non-law enforcement employees in a perfect balance.

4. Cooperators. We were able to establish a coalition of roughly fifteen agencies to work toward one common goal. I think the relations established in this case will pay dividends for years to come.

Closing

This is about resource protection and safety of our employees and visitors; the very things we were created to do.

We do not have the resources to effectively fight this threat. We, as an agency, have not truly shown the stomach for the fight. We need additional funding, personnel, training, and to be allowed to educate the public and our cooperators.

We must hire at least one full time DTO agent. (b) (6) [REDACTED] calls this a "luxury"; I think we are negligent not to do so. I feel it is an absolute necessity and is supported by the facts and statistics.

We have a unique opportunity to address this in the early stages, and we must before we lose the battle. If we don't, we will suffer the same fate as other regions. This is a time for action and the taxpayers deserve and demand that.

During the season when DTO activity is prevalent, we have been forced to restrict our employees from working in large portions of the forest. Work is not getting done in those areas that needs to be done, some of it contractual.

Essentially, the DTO's then control portions of our lands and dictate what happens on them, not the USFS people entrusted to protect and manage those lands. This is a very dangerous situation; when the criminals control our lands and dictate our activities, the duties we are charged with, then the time for action is truly at hand.