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## **Central Valley's booming medical marijuana crop draws violence**

As farmers turn to lucrative pot amid the recession, robberies and shootings put law enforcement and locals on edge. The region is heavily conservative, but some of those affected say the solution is to legalize it.

By Diana Marcum, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Lindsay, California

The father was clearly worried.

Behind him, his son was tossing medical marijuana plants into a truck — part of a hasty move out of this small farm town after a deadly shooting.

The week before, on a mid-September night about 11:30 p.m., Robert Craven had gotten a call from his son, who lives a half-mile away down a country road. The son said his neighbors, who also grew medical marijuana, were being robbed. There were four gunmen.

"I flew over there locked and loaded, there was already an ambulance coming down the road," said Craven, 45, a pig farmer and Little League coach.

The son had gone next-door armed with a handgun. One of the gunmen grabbed him from behind and the son fired over his shoulder, according to police reports. Authorities deemed the shooting self-defense. He killed a 17-year-old suspected gang member.

Now he's on the run from threats of retaliation.

It's harvest season in California's Central Valley, and that includes medical marijuana. Pot-growing used to be more the domain of free-thinking, freely-puffing places such as Humboldt County along the state's northern coast. But in recent years, with some legal cover, this conservative, agricultural valley has sprouted a new favorite crop and a new crop of troubles.

"There's so much of it that we can't even get a handle on the quantity," said Capt. Jose Flores of the Fresno County Sheriff's Department.

"We're the No. 1 agricultural valley in the world. Then you add this recession where there are people who know how to grow things who are desperate to augment their livelihood, unclear laws that allow growing marijuana, doctors who will write a prescription for anything, and for

the past three years it's been open season on marijuana-growing in our rural setting," he said. "We're a very fertile valley."

Medical marijuana cards might shield growers from law enforcement, but not from robbery. In the past month in the Central Valley there have been at least five confrontations with growers, two of them fatal. In one Fresno incident, a woman in her 70s used a machete to ward off two thieves. One of the thieves fired a round that wounded an 82-year-old man who lived in the home.

Citing the Valley violence, Fresno County's Board of Supervisors on Sept. 14 passed an emergency ban on outdoor medical marijuana cultivation.

Proposition 19, an initiative on the November ballot, would legalize non-medical marijuana in California and allow it to be regulated and taxed. A Public Policy Institute of California poll released Thursday showed majorities in the San Francisco Bay Area and much of Southern California support Prop. 19, while a majority in the Central Valley do not.

In the Lindsay shooting, police arrested two men on suspicion of robbery and kidnapping. A third is wanted for questioning.

Craven thought medical marijuana cards protected his 22-year-old son and his son's friends. They all had plants, they all had prescriptions (his son's was for migraine headaches). Craven didn't much like their pot-smoking, but they were grown men and he'd been most worried about them getting in trouble with the law. He hadn't thought of robbers.

"I mean, why that house?" he said. "You're going to have trouble finding a place around here that doesn't have a grow."

Across the street, Maria Sanchez, a grandmother, had a medical card. Her squat, showy pot plant grew among her rose bushes.

"I don't smoke it. I use it in tea. I use the leaves and just a tiny bit of bud. I have really bad arthritis," she said.

Her son, Socorro Sanchez, 31, also had a prescription and his own plants.

"I make edibles, like rice crispy treats," he said. "You make marijuana butter and when a recipe calls for oil you replace it with the butter. It's for my epilepsy."

Around the bend, behind a two-story barn-style home was at least a half-acre of marijuana in a partly open shed next to fields of pumpkins, flowers, tomatoes, corn, jalapeños and cilantro.

Up and down country roads near Lindsay, at the base of the Sierra foothills in Tulare County, a soft breeze carried the distinctive odor of budding marijuana plants, as if the smell of a rock concert had been distilled in herbal tea, then wafted over earth and fertilizer. Tulare County requires marijuana to be cultivated within a protective structure, but this seems to be often

loosely interpreted as arbors or hedges. It's easier and cheaper to grow marijuana outside in the sunshine.

In Fresno, at an outdoor marijuana garden next to Brown's Floral and across the street from the city's oldest park, the scent was even stronger.

Ten-foot-tall plants were easily visible over a ragged wooden fence. A posted sign with a drawing of a gun read: "Never mind the dog. Beware the owner."

"When the wind kicks up, boy do you smell it then," said Reuben Tolentino, who works in the flower shop. "On breezy days we used to say, 'Smells likes trouble.' "

Trouble came Sept. 8 when their neighbor Phayvahn Dydouangphan, 47, shot 40-year-old Stanley Wallace, who later died.

Police say Dydouangphan heard his dogs bark about 6:30 a.m. and found six or seven men in his yard, uprooting plants. He fired a shotgun at them. As they tried to drive away, he fired again, hitting Wallace in the head. Dydouangphan will stand trial on a murder charge.

"I don't know how you could not have known something like this was going to happen," said 70-year-old flower shop owner Donna Brown. "It was like someone put candy in my driveway and told all the kids, 'It's not for you.' "

Brown is a fixture in the neighborhood. She lets homeless friends and others who are down-and-out park on her property. She also extended kindness to the police officer who watched over the marijuana next-door after the shooting.

"He was there for two days, so I took him over a sandwich and a Coke. He said, 'Thank you. You just don't know how terrible it is for a cop to have to guard a pot farm.' "

Brown says she's voting in favor of Proposition 19, which critics say could increase marijuana consumption and further confuse legalities by clashing with federal law.

"How could it get any more insane than it already is?" Brown said. "A man died over a plant, next to my floral shop. Just legalize it already."

Richard Hanni, a 49-year-old homeless man who does chores around the shop, said the marijuana garden next-door — which has earned the corner the nickname "flower-pot" — is atrocious. Not just for the deadly violence or for being right across the street from a city park where a choo-choo train makes it way through Storyland, but for the state of the feathery, spindly plants.

"There was no need to let them get that tall. Those buds should be three times bigger," he said. "Now, last year, they had a real nice-looking garden. Mostly pumpkins. People did steal a few pumpkins. But the difference is they knew how to grow those right and no one got killed."