

David Rubin: Pot industry needs regulation

By David Rubin

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COMMENTS

In 1970, the year Earth Day was founded, my wife-to-be and I spent the night dancing to the Grateful Dead. We didn't foresee that over the next five decades we would go to almost 200 Dead shows; move to the Santa Cruz Mountains (near where the Grateful Dead performed for Ken Kesey's Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests); use cannabis lotion to treat arthritis pain; or that I would be fighting to keep commercial cannabis operations from damaging the environment in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Cannabis operations in California have poisoned wildlife, drained and polluted streams, disturbed neighbors (with odors, generators, guns, and threats), and started devastating wildfires. Titles of news stories record the history of cannabis disasters: "California's 50,000 Pot Farms Are Sucking Rivers Dry" (Scientific American, July 3, 2015); "Loma Fire caused by marijuana farm in Santa Cruz mountains" (KSBW, Aug. 10, 2017); "State of Emergency Declared in Yuba County Due to Illegal Marijuana Farms" (Capital Public Radio, Dec. 28, 2017); and "The Dirty Secret of California's Cannabis: It's Dirty" (Wired, Feb. 2, 2018). Wired reports that in Humboldt County 15-20 percent of commercial cannabis operations on private land and virtually all operations on public lands use rodenticides.

Cannabis operations are damaging our own Santa Cruz Mountains. Our county's 2015 document, "Environmental, Fire, and Health & Safety Concerns Related to Cannabis Cultivation", reported that "Not one of the sites inspected by Code Compliance staff have been in compliance with environmental regulations." From 2001 through 2013, eight government agencies and environmental organizations worked to restore coho salmon and steelhead trout in San Vicente Creek near Davenport. In 2014, California Department of Fish and Wildlife raided a pot farm that was contaminating that stream with toxic chemicals, damaging the streambed, and diverting water (CDFW News, July 2014).

The Santa Cruz Mountains were an attractive location for growing illegal cannabis. The rugged remote terrain and redwood trees concealed illegal activities, and the county had lax enforcement. In 2015, California Lt. Governor Newsom's report on cannabis stated: "California likely does not want to invite a new gold rush of people into the state to cultivate marijuana, as happened in counties like Santa Cruz ..."

When our Board of Supervisors votes on commercial cannabis regulations next month, we (Coalition for Environmental Santa Cruz and the Rural Bonny Doon Association) urge them not to weaken any of the protections recommended by the Planning Commission. Although the proposed regulations provide substantial protections to the mountain environment, they would still allow commercial cultivation on some residential properties smaller than five acres, which is not permitted anywhere else in California.

Our county prides itself on its progressive and tolerant policies — bumper stickers and T-shirts exclaim "Keep Santa Cruz weird" — but we shouldn't tolerate environmentally destructive business, regardless of whether it is cannabis or other industry. Our county's 2017 Draft Environmental Impact Report estimated that we have up to 10,000 commercial cannabis operations, but only 760 have registered for licenses (presumably because they don't want to be subject to regulations, taxes, zoning requirements or environmental inspection).

Listening to the Grateful Dead in 1970, it never occurred to me that commercialized cannabis might someday collide with the ideals of Earth Day. Now that cannabis is decriminalized, cultivation should be moved into the open where farms can be inspected and regulated — not hidden in rich mountain ecosystems. We need protection from the cannabis industry, just as we need protection from nuclear power plants, oil drilling and other commercial interests that damage the environment.

David Rubin is a geologist living in the Santa Cruz Mountains. His discovery of an active earthquake fault offshore Eureka, California led to closure of the Humboldt Bay nuclear reactor.