

# CITIZENS VIEW



**2019**  
**APRIL**

**Focus-Marijuana**



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## WHEN OREGON BLEW IT

**OREGON AUDITS**  
**EXPOSE POT**  
**REGULATION**  
**PROBLEMS**

**OLCC SUPPLY DEMAND**  
**REPORT**

<https://www.oregon.gov/olcc/marijuana/Documents/Bulletins/2019%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20Legislative%20Report%20FINAL%20for%20Publication%28PDF%29.pdf>

**SECRETARY OF STATE**  
**POT REGULATION AUDIT**  
**REPORT**

<https://sos.oregon.gov/audits/Documents/2019-04.pdf>

Aldo Leopold, the great conservationist and writer, once wrote, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” I wonder what he would have to say about the way cannabis is grown in my part of Oregon.

Consider, for a moment, a nesting pair of red-tailed hawks, birds of prey whose mating patterns are monogamous, who protect and defend their home over many years. Think then of a private landowner who stewards her small farm with responsibility, and who watches and admires the hawks and their offspring. Consider the arrival of an industrial cannabis system next door, outsized in scale and suitability for its particular watershed, in essence large infrastructure made for substitute light, restricted air, and controlled climate for the purpose of a high yield, high cash crop.

Then come squirrels, which nibble at the crop’s roots. Next comes the cannabis

growers’ response, the application of rodenticides, which they apparently have little knowledge about how to use, or maybe they just don’t care about the consequences. Imagine how that toxic substance moves through a system all connected—a system that might include insects, earthworms, the salamander, willow, song warblers, voles, squirrels. Picture the fatal kill of a single hawk. Then the empty nest.

White Oak Farm is situated in the hills of the rugged Siskiyou Mountains, which range from the coast of Oregon and California east, and where for a hundred miles the mountains arc into forests of fir, cedar, redwood, and pine. The farm is in the Williams Valley, a sub-watershed of the Applegate Valley of southwestern Oregon. It’s an organic vegetable and fruit farm on a southern slope, dotted with vigorous grape vines and fruit trees. I visited White Oak on a blistering day in May 2017, while dragonflies whirred and hummingbirds buzzed. Taylor Starr operates the farm with his wife Sarah Shea and their small daughter Willow, who ran through the perennial gardens in her summer dress like a sprite on the

wind. Taylor (worn baseball hat, dirty T-shirt) sat down with me to discuss a complex issue splintering this small agricultural community: What happened to this community after cannabis was legalized?

The town of Williams, the home of White Oak Farm, is truly at the “end of the road”—only one small highway goes in and out, with the Siskiyou Mountains as a backdrop. With a population of 2,500, Williams has an active agricultural Grange (part of a US historical tradition of fraternal farmer organizations), a community center for a preschool and kindergarten, a few small general stores, a gas station, a bar, and a taco shop.

Taylor told me the history of the last fifty years of this place: People escaped conventional American culture to live in teepees and yurts, drive old Subaru’s, and shit in outhouses (you were up and coming if you had a composting toilet). A community of activists, artists, and farmers was born. For a long time, folks scraped together a living selling trinkets at craft fairs, plants and vegetables at the local market, and medical marijuana—which became le-

# WHEN OREGON BLEW IT CONTINUED

al in Oregon way back in 1998. “People grew medical marijuana to make extra income, not to create an empire,” Taylor said.

Empire builders would come later. As Steve Marks, the Executive Director of the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, told *Cannabis Wire*, “The thing that was foreseeable was that Oregon’s system was crafted in such an open market way. You could have multiple licenses for growing. You could be vertically integrated...up the supply chain. You knew, with the interest, there was going to be a Gold Rush. It was going to be a very capitalistic, rough and tough market.”

In 2014, Measure 91 passed in Oregon, legalizing the production and use of cannabis for recreational purposes. The bill was signed into law by Governor Kate Brown in 2015. Since then, the state has been overwhelmed with the regulatory aspects of managing both the new recreational and the existing medical industries, as well as monitoring overall cannabis production—including how much is grown and the use of pesticides and water.

This has particularly negative ecological implications, among other repercussions. With the rapid influx of out-of-area growers developing the industry, and regulation continuing to be a problem in the state, the result has been an uncontrolled boom that is slowing down and leaving a great deal of ugliness in its wake.

The Oregon Health Authority released a [report](#) in May assessing the state’s medical marijuana program, citing many challenges faced by the state, including, as the report put it:

- “Insufficient and inaccurate reporting and tracking” of cannabis farming
- “Inability to validate grow site locations”
- “Dispensary and processor inspections [that] did not keep pace with applications”
- “Not enough inspections and enforcement of grow sites”
- “Resources unable to meet regulatory

demand”

Among other things, the state has thus far not been able to track how much cannabis is in the medical system, according to the report, nor can it track its medical grow sites.

According to the report, in December 2017 the rate of compliance for reporting the cultivation of usable marijuana products was 26%. The state has admitted that “the program simply does not have the staff resources to issue civil penalties for the number of non-reporting growers.” This raises the question: How many illegal sites are operating in the state?

One result of all this is a continued overproduction of cannabis in the state, which is finding its way into out-of-state markets. Oregon’s US Attorney, Billy J. Williams, submitted a statement about cannabis in the state in response to the report, stating that Oregon’s cannabis industry “...is out of control. The industry’s considerable and negative impacts on land use, water, and underage consumption must be addressed immediately.”

Another [report](#) was released in July by law enforcement officials with the Oregon–Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which, among other things, found that: “Illicit grow operations scar Oregon’s distinct ecosystems, by employing excessive amounts of pesticides, rodenticides, and herbicides, clearing vegetation, and clustering plants near water sources—disproportionately affecting ecologically critical areas.”

The report also found that some counties that have come to rely on cannabis income may face “a critical economic risk” as cannabis prices fall due to overproduction. It also had worries about “acute hydrologic strain” on the water system because of “the exponential growth of cannabis cultivation.”

Oregon’s particularly lax regulation

combined with the expanded economic opportunity attracted an influx of bad actors. And, as a result, the state’s cannabis community, in particular the growers in the southern part of the state, changed. For a long time before the legalization of recreational marijuana, growers were operating on a small scale as family businesses. Some were compliant with state laws regarding medical marijuana, and others sold cannabis into in-state and out-of-state black markets, but in both cases most of these growers were part of the local community. Many of these small growers are beginning to get out of the business now, due to the overproduction of cannabis in the state since the passage of Measure 91, driven by both licensed and unlicensed moneyed interests who are developing large-scale cannabis farms, and who often do not live or participate in the local community, and thus have less investment in the care of the land and community.

Another group has also emerged: an influx of growers planting large-scale monocropped cannabidiol (CBD)-rich hemp on many acres. It remains to be seen how they might contribute to and fit in with their local communities. Michael Johnson, Chief Operations Officer at Siskiyou Sun grown, a southwestern Oregon licensed cannabis grower offers this, “Many people have jumped off of the cannabis bandwagon and jumped onto the hemp bandwagon. The market for hemp is worldwide, and there’s a lot of ‘hope’ around this being the next best thing for Southern Oregon.”

But, he fears, there are too many growers producing more than the market can bear. “At the end of the day, hemp is heading the same way that cannabis is — with rock bottom pricing and a saturated marketplace,” Johnson said.

The Williams and Applegate Valleys became popular locations to

grow medical marijuana under the Oregon Medical Marijuana Program during the seventeen-year gap between 1998, when medical cannabis became legal, and 2014, when recreational cannabis became legal. But as soon as the potential market expanded beyond 75,511 patients (in [2015](#)) to a consumer base worth \$280 million a year [in 2016](#), small growers knew they could be forced, or bought, out of business. The legislation required that cannabis be grown on “Exclusive Farm Use” land with irrigation rights, where the highest quality topsoil's are located. Some farmers cashed in on the rush by selling their farms at inflated prices.

The investors—venture capitalists, lawyers, and others—then paved over Class One and Class Two agricultural soils (the highest quality soils to grow crops) with gravel and rock, and constructed large-scale cannabis farms, essentially industrial warehouses of marijuana over several acres. Many of these new cannabis farms did not fit the landscape, in a topography known for its rustic charm and agricultural substance. “I’m not anti-cannabis,” says Taylor Starr, of White Oak Farm. “I’m anti-industrial. It’s a bad fit for the environment. It’s a bad fit for the community. I don’t have a problem with starting a business, but to me, it’s the scale—if it’s not going to use the dirt, the sun, the wind, then it shouldn’t be on farmland. Put it in industrial zones.”

The cannabis boom also brought other challenges to our communities, like traffic, theft, and violence. My own quiet two-lane rural road has a maximum speed limit of forty miles per hour, though I sometimes have to follow a tractor down the road at twenty. Now I encounter vehicles flying down the road at seventy-five. I no longer allow my children to ride their bikes there. A longtime resident of the Applegate was beaten into the hospital after asking a grower to slow down on the country roads. He is seventy-three.



At the local gas station and cafe in Applegate, I notice the new cannabis growers: white men mainly, who often drive brand-new trucks. It’s a scene that clashes with the transients who park their vans on the side of the highway, or the young dreadlocked hip

pies who hang out in parking lots with dogs and signs that say, “Fast trimmers for hire!”

All communities change, but something here is being lost. The Applegate Valley, of which Williams is a part, sits on the border of California and Oregon, in the great Rogue River Basin. The valley hosts a rich agricultural heritage of mixed farms—hay and woodlands, beef and dairy, tulips and prunes, pears and vineyards, and, in recent years, organic vegetable and seed production. The mountains surrounding the Applegate and Williams Valley are some of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the contiguous United States, hosting populations of endemic plant and tree species and many rare species of animals including the Marten, Pacific Fisher, Northern Spotted Owl, and Roosevelt Elk. In addition, the Applegate River, a tributary of the great Rogue River, is a habitat for native Coho salmon, a rare subspecies endemic to this region that is struggling to maintain its population. Our small Thompson Creek watershed, meanwhile, hosts more than twenty small rural businesses, including a lavender farm; an organic cidery; an organic seed producer; growers of organic vegetables, grains, and beef; a small vineyard—and now, primarily, a line of cannabis farms up and down the road. I went to see a neighbor to get his opinion of the drastic changes in the landscape and what he thought might be the larger impacts on the watershed. Jakob Shockey works with the Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council as a restoration ecologist and lives on his parent’s homestead, which at one time, housed several generations of the family.

His commitment to land stewardship and community has always impressed me. He’s a tall man with a wide grin, and over green tea he told me about a neighbor who once described the Applegate area this way: “It’s poverty with a view.” In other words, people move here for the beauty of the landscape, but have a tough time making a living.

Jakob has worked for years with private landowners to help them restore the creek systems, and now he’s working with cannabis growers, at least the ones

interested in preserving the land, which he says are few and far between. “I don’t walk creeks without express permission anymore,” he said. “It used to be that I can walk up on the neighbor and ask to walk

the creek. And now, no way. It’s become a culture of locked gates, paranoia, dogs, cameras.”

And the questions remain: What will happen now that the boom has slowed, and in the aftermath of Oregon’s regulatory failure? What will occur in Oregon’s marketplace once other states legalize? And what kind of footprints will be left behind? The economy is thriving for some, but those interested in preserving the integrity of the ecosystem have little leverage.

**To read the rest of Melissa Matthewson article. See link below.**



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**CONNECTIONS**

- **Monthly Connections**
- **Quarterly Citizen View Newsletter**
- **Quarterly Community Educational Forums –Focus Marijuana**
- **Annual Nat'l Safe Drug Policy Summit-Focus Marijuana –APRIL 2020**
- **Web Trainings**
- **Small groups meetings**

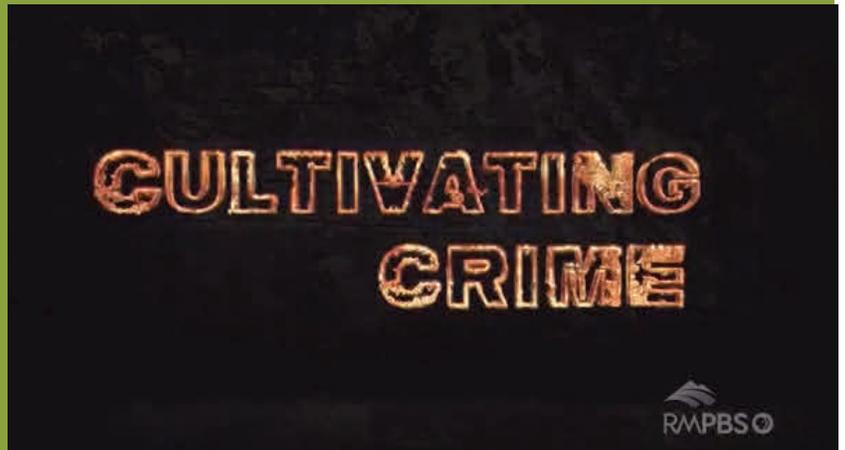


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