

More Reasons Drug Prohibition Hurts the Environment

by Eric Sterling

Every environmentalist concerned about the protection of national parks, mitigation of pollution, or the protection of American endangered species must put solving the crisis of narcotics on his or her agenda.

What many environmentalists have not yet seen is that drug prohibition is a major cause of urban and suburban sprawl in the U.S. and the loss of open space and scarce farmland. All disputes in the \$62.4 billion domestic illegal drug trade are resolved violently. (For example, you can't sue the seller of adulterated marijuana in the district court for breach of contract.) Open-air drug markets create threatening disorder on urban streets. The high cost of prohibited drugs leads drug addicts to crime to pay for drugs - prostitution, shop-lifting, car break-ins, check and credit card theft, fraud, burglary, robbery. Even the heavy presence of the police necessary to combat the crime contributes to the threatening environment. These urban neighborhoods have a complete infrastructure - transportation, sewer and water lines, electricity and gas supply, telephone and data connection - and proximity to markets and labor. Suburban development requires these expensive investments. But prohibition-driven crime deters business decision-makers such as retailers and employers from locating in the cities. Where can new home buyers find cheap housing? In remote suburbs with long commutes to the workplace, or in urban neighborhoods that resound with gunfire. The result is more traffic congestion, automotive air pollution, global warming, and sprawl.

In the United States, drug prohibition leads illegal drug cultivators and manufacturers to locate in remote, environmentally pristine areas. Our nation's drug policy, with an emphasis on forfeiture laws, results in drug traffickers clandestinely choosing to put their drug labs and marijuana fields on public lands such as national forests. Illicit manufacturers of methamphetamine generate highly toxic waste, which is simply dumped. Illicit cultivators cut down U.S. forests, cut roads and trails, lay irrigation piping and use fertilizers and herbicides. This fills the watersheds and the aquifers with toxic waste, hazardous chemicals, and silt. These environmental losses would be substantially reduced if the marijuana and drug industries were regulated, licensed and taxed.

What strategy is more likely to protect the environment in the long term? Continuing and intensifying the war on drugs, or regulating and controlling the use, manufacture and distribution of illegal drugs?

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