

# Eel River Recovery Project

2014 Rose Foundation Wildlands Grant Final Report:

BLM Little and Big Dann Creek Marijuana Clean Up



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For the *Eel River Recovery Project*

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## **Acknowledgements**

The Eel River Recovery Project (ERRP) is extremely grateful to the Rose Foundation for the second California Wildlands Grant that allowed us to finish clean up of trespass, cartel marijuana grows on U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holdings in the Little Dann Creek watershed, which is adjacent to the Red Mountain Wilderness Area and tributary to the South Fork Eel River. Additionally, we are very indebted to the community civic and service organizations that helped us identify grow areas, helped arrange access through private lands for clean ups, and even got out and helped clean up these highly undesirable “grow scenes”. These are the Leggett Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Leggett Volunteer Fire Department and the Bell Springs Volunteer Fire Department.

ERRP highly values its partnership with BLM’s Arcata Office and has found nothing but support from retired Director Rousche, Acting Director Chris Heppe and BLM’s Enforcement Officer Jeff Knisley. Thanks also to the Mendocino County Sheriff’s Department, the California Conservation Corps, and the National Guard for playing key roles in facilitating Little Dann Creek grow sites.

Of course we are always thankful for the well spring of constant support for ERRP activities from people within the Eel River basin who came out to volunteer. These volunteers are attracted to our movement because of the unbounded commitment of Jeff Hedin and Bruce Hilbach-Barger, ERRP Wilderness Committee Co-Chairs. Their mission-driven commitment has allowed us to amass hundreds of volunteer hours for cleaning up, what is to us, sacred ground and reclaiming it for its intended use.

The clean bill of health given to Little Dann Creek by BLM’s Ranger means that ERRP is ready to work with BLM to get volunteer trail crews in to convert a road there to a trail and to begin to encourage public use. This follows on original plans laid by ERRP and Linda Rousche and BLM staff that reclaiming and celebrating these treasured public lands could follow abatement and clean up of grows. The 2015 Rose Foundation California Wildlands grant will help us further our objectives while cementing our partnership with BLM and taking similar efforts South Fork Eel River basin-wide.

## **Background**

Industrial marijuana grows on public lands and in Wilderness Areas within the Eel River basin are poisoning the water, denuding the land, decimating the wildlife, and leaving a toxic legacy. Creeks and headwater areas are dammed and the water diverted and sent to gardens through miles of plastic pipes. Chemicals are often mixed into these diversion ponds and overflow to poison stream reaches below. If the agencies and ERRP do not remove infrastructure for grow sites, then the foreign marijuana cartels send in new waves of growers every year.

The Arcata Office of BLM already had targeted marijuana grow clean up in the Red Mountain Wilderness as a priority before being approached by ERRP to expand efforts using volunteers. ERRP brought the accumulated experience of Bruce Hilbach-Barger, who had previously carried out grow site clean up on the Mendocino National Forest, and other public lands throughout California, and Jeff Hedin, who was a seminal force in designation of the Red Mountain Wilderness Area and who has intimate knowledge of the local landscape and communities. The Rose Foundation 2014 California Wildlands grant provided critical resources for volunteer coordination and travel, without which this project would not have been possible.

Although ERRP did make some progress on Wilderness expansion as described by our 2014 CA Wildlands application, the funds disbursed were all directed towards clean-ups. Therefore, there is no progress report on expansion herein.

## **Accomplishments**

ERRP and BLM were able to clean up three marijuana grow sites within the Little Dann Creek watershed on the edge of the Red Mountain Wilderness area from February through May of 2014. The coordination, methods, logistics and outcomes are reported below for each of the three clean-ups.

Big Dann Creek - Cleanup #1 - February 21, 2014: Fourteen ERRP volunteers, two BLM Law Enforcement staff, and one Mendocino County Sherriff's Deputy entered the grow site through Little Dann Creek Road. Trash and other grow materials were retrieved from grower camp and staging areas on the South Bank. The main grow area was approximately ¼ mile east on the North Bank. Materials found and retrieved included 60 feet of black poly-pipe, 30 plugs of nutrient rich potting soil (1.5 cubic yards), a tarp lined 80 gallon tank structure, and trash. Diversions were found and pipe retrieved from four different small tributary branches of Big Dann Creek.

A second upland site was approximately 1/8 mile south of the North Bank site. The diversion nearest the Upland South Bank site was an intact tarp lined 750 gallon pool with an upstream supplemental supply. There were six diversions left in place after the grow and removal of more poly-pipe and reconnection of spring and creek flows to the proper channels was carried out. Toxic chemicals found and retrieved at the site included a 4 pound package of rodenticide and one package of deer repellent. The total poly-pipe removed was over 2 miles in length! All materials were hauled to the end of Little Dann Creek Road for removal.

After completing the February clean-up, ERRP grow site reclamation efforts continued. At the request of, and with the cooperation of BLM Law Enforcement, Bruce Hilbach-Barger and Jeff Hedin continued outreach to the neighboring communities. Leggett Volunteer Fire Department Chief Ely Reichter was particularly useful in that he identified two additional sites in the Little Dann Creek drainage that were next targeted for reclamation. Bruce, Jeff and Ely assisted BLM in mapping, scouting and planning reclamation. BLM learned of two sites previously unknown.

Big Dann Creek - Cleanup #2 – April 4-7, 2014: On Sunday April 4 (which was the same day as ERRP's annual Water Day celebration) two ERRP volunteer coordinators helped implement the clean-up work plan using highly motivated members of the California Conservation Corps (CCC) as a crew. BLM Rangers were also present to train and supervise the removal of trash, pipe and other debris from one easily accessible site. On Monday, April 4, ERRP volunteer coordinator Bruce Hilbach-Barger was joined by four ERRP volunteers who assisted the CCC crew in completing reclamation of the remote site, about two miles hike from the nearest road access. Three ½ mile source lines were removed from the spring fed tributary to Big Dann Creek and piled with pipe and camp garbage from three large plots. Coordinates were taken for later helicopter removal. The ERRP/CCC cooperative effort ended Tuesday and Wednesday with a coordinated reclamation of all five Big Dann Creek Sites. The team split into two squads to maximize effectiveness, one squad trail hiking to the Little Dann Headwaters to move and pile remote source pipe and a ten year or older grow site, the other working on the three main sites lower in the watershed and nearer to road access. At the end of Wednesday, April 7 the most easily removed site's garbage was relayed to the road side by a combined effort of both teams and staged for later removal.

The interactions between CCC members and ERRP participants were inspiring. Teaching, learning and work happened in multiple directions throughout all four days. Environmental effects of grow site activities were discussed and reclamation techniques were taught to CCC members and crew leaders. Broader conversations also occurred constantly about plant communities, geology and soils, watersheds, and even social issues affecting community behavior, which made the experience much more meaningful. The CCC crew invited third day ERRP participants and BLM Rangers to a spaghetti dinner. Eighteen days of time were contributed by seven ERRP participants. The value of those contributions was enhanced by cooperative synergy.

The outgrowth of those efforts was a large amount of grow trash, piled and ready for removal. BLM Law Enforcement asked ERRP to plan volunteer support for subsequent Coast Guard helicopter removal of trash in late April or early May.

#### Helicopter Support for Trash Removal - Cleanup #3 – May 13-15, 2014

ERRP provided volunteers to supplement Army-Guard ground crew and BLM personnel from Tuesday, May 13 through Thursday, May 15. A 20 yard dumpster, a trailer for hauling poly pipe for recycling and a landing site for material were coordinated by BLM. ERRP coordinated a recycling team for the landing zone, field volunteers and assistance with local access through adjacent private lands.

The first day, ERRP volunteers split into small squads. These crews were highly organized and efficient because of previous experience of volunteers, but especially due to specific direction by volunteer coordinator Bruce Hilbach Barger. The Coast Guard helicopter experienced maintenance issues and by mid-day the squads began to return to the operations base. Small amounts of trash that had been staged at roadside were retrieved by vehicle, however, we took advantage of knowledge gained and planned even more efficient efforts for the next day.

On Wednesday (May 14), the field squads and landing zone crew did an amazing job of loading and unloading nets, recycling and sorting, moving from one pick up zone to another, and remaining safe under the guidance of BLM Law Enforcement and National Guard personnel. All but two lifts were completed in the single days work and over three days accomplished the removal of trash from seven

sites. Twenty cubic yards of trash were disposed of. Several hundred pounds of material were repurposed. Two miles of black poly pipe and several hundred pounds of other material were recycled. Fifteen ERRP Volunteers participated contributing 21 total work days of volunteer labor.

## **Conclusion**

BLM Rangers now believe that the Dann Creek drainages are nearly free of trespass grow refuse. Since the completion of that project we have explored possibilities for further cooperation with BLM and improvement of access to the Red Mountain Wilderness through Little Dann Creek Road is the next option we are pursuing. In addition to converting a road to a trail with volunteer labor, ERRP will also start to promote public use of this trail so that nefarious uses are dissuaded and local residents and visitors can once again safely enjoy accessing these treasured public lands.

## **Budget**

The invoice to Trees Foundation appended to this report from Bruce Hilbach-Barger chronicles the projects expenditures, with addition of \$245 to Trees itself (7% Admin) and the balance to Jeff Hedin for mileage expense.