

TALL TIMBERS: WAPAW Pulls Cannabis From The Trees

**Text and Photos by Matt Wenman,
Western Australia Police Air Wing (WAPAW)**

Over the past 14 years, the Western Australia Police Air Wing (WAPAW) has conducted an annual cannabis eradication program in the southwest of the state, codename "Operation Tall Timbers." The name was derived from the towering trees of the southwest terrain. The aim of the operation is to eradicate large cannabis crops being grown in the southwest forests and disrupt illegal drug activity through the cultivation and selling of cannabis.

Experience over the years has shown that these illegal plantations are almost impossible to locate on foot due to the dense forest undergrowth. The only effective means of locating such crops is from the air.

During this year's operation, intelligence from police officers stationed in the southwest indicated that cannabis growers were active in the forests and national parks. The officers also determined that the cannabis crops were close to harvest. The harvesting season usually occurs between January and March due to the perfect growing climate of the southwest. Operation Tall Timbers was conducted over a four-week period between February and April 2007.

Early intelligence suggests that this year's operation was a significant success, having already shown considerable impact on the cannabis growing operations in the southwest district.

The first week of the operation concentrated around the tourist towns of Nannup and Margaret River. In conjunction with officers from these stations, WAPAW utilized its Cessna 182 (Polair 62) and two ground crews to locate and remove cannabis plants from national parks. During this period, only 30 percent of the determined search areas were covered due to inclement weather conditions. However, 12 crops containing numerous cannabis plants were located and seized. A further 10 cannabis crops were located but not removed due to the harsh and inhospitable terrain and lack of time.

The second week involved the WAPAW's BK117 helicopter (Polair 61) and four ground crews. Officers were winched into the cannabis crops, evidence was gathered, and the plants were bundled up and winched out. Extracting the plants with a helicopter reduced the risk of officers being injured and eliminated the time required to guide officers in through thick vegetation.

The remainder of the cannabis crops observed during the previous week were seized from bush areas. During this part of the operation, two large cannabis crops were observed growing on rural private properties. Officers conducted search warrants on these properties and located a number of plants and cannabis material. Two persons were

charged with numerous drug offenses, including sale and supply of cannabis, which carries a penalty of up to a \$100,000 fine and/or imprisonment for a term of up to 25 years.

The third week saw WAPAW staff concentrating around the southwest towns of Pemberton and Northcliffe. Utilizing Polair 62, searches of the surrounding national parks to the southeast of Northcliffe were conducted. A total of 29 cannabis crop sites were located with a large number of cannabis plants seized. All of the plants were mature, valuable and ranged from two to four meters in height. The plants were valued by a botanist at approximately \$20,000 per plant and had an estimated street value of \$15.6 million.

During this period, officers stopped a male driver of a Toyota 4WD Landcruiser in the national park. The driver was in possession of a Police scanner, tools and supplies associated with the cultivation of cannabis. No charges have yet been filed, but investigations are continuing.

On the following day, police officers also stopped a Toyota Hilux utility vehicle on the South Western Highway north of Pemberton due to its driving behavior. A subsequent search of his vehicle located 5.8 kilograms of cannabis head material concealed in plastic garbage bags. Further inquiries revealed the majority of his cannabis crops had been eradicated from the Northcliffe area by WAPAW during the week. The driver was charged with possession of cannabis with intent to sell/supply, and inquiries are continuing regarding further charges.

The final week of the operation again concentrated on the Pemberton and Northcliffe areas, where final searches were conducted in the national parks, resulting in a large number of mature cannabis plants being located.

As a result of the four-week operation, a total of 2,405 mature cannabis plants and eight kilograms of cannabis head was located and seized by Western Australian Police. As all plants were close to harvest, an estimated street value of \$20 million was placed on the seizure.

A number of empty crop sites were identified during this year's operation and will be revisited during the 2008 season.