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Marijuana haul sharply lower

By **Ken Kobayashi**
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Competition from Mainland marijuana growers and continuing law enforcement efforts have drastically reduced the state's outdoor production from the 1980s, federal officials said yesterday after announcing the latest Operation Green Harvest sweep.

The 10-day statewide sweep that ended Thursday recovered about 29,000 marijuana plants, an indication that marijuana cultivation has dropped dramatically from the 1980s. Federal officials said marijuana cultivation was a major problem during that decade when 1.9 million plants were recovered in 1987, mostly from the Big Island.

With its climate conducive to growing the plants all year, Hawai'i historically has been ranked fourth in the United States — after Kentucky, Tennessee and California — in marijuana production, federal officials said. At one point, it led the nation in the number of plants recovered.

"I believe that only because of our aggressive efforts the yearly harvest yields now remain substantially less than the 1980s," U.S. Attorney Ed Kubo told reporters yesterday.

He said Green Harvest operations have now turned into a "control and maintenance stage."

Kubo said he realizes they won't ever totally eliminate marijuana, but will continue the operations "so that it will not get out of control again in Hawai'i."

He also said another reason for the decrease is competition from marijuana brought in from the Mainland.

Operation Green Harvest, a joint effort by federal and state authorities and local police, was launched in the late 1970s when growers turned to canefields and other rural acreage to grow the lucrative plants that soon became a booming underground business venture.

The federal government has provided the city and the Neighbor Island counties \$1.4 million for the current operations.

The latest sweep, from May 31 to Thursday, included seven to 10 helicopters and about 125 officers. The plants that were confiscated — some as tall as 8 feet — had an estimated value of \$29 million, based on the federal Drug Enforcement Administration's usual estimate of \$1,000 per plant.

On the Big Island, more than 10,400 plants were seized; in Maui County, more than 16,800 plants, with about 10,000 recovered within a couple miles of the Moloka'i airport; on O'ahu, 1,500 plants; and on Kaua'i, 250 plants.

The operation involved a task force that included Honolulu and Neighbor Island police and investigators from the DEA, the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, the Hawai'i National Guard Counter-Drug Unit and the U.S. National Park Service.

The last statewide sweep occurred in 2000, but since then, Green Harvest sweeps have been conducted on individual islands yanking 300,000 to 500,000 plants a year, DEA Special Agent Randy Wagner said.

Wagner said law enforcement has been doing a "great job" that is forcing the growers to take their

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operations indoors, which is "exactly what we want." That would make it easier to identify the growers and seize their houses and assets, he said.

The marijuana plants from the latest sweep were collected from both public and private lands, but the difficulty in prosecuting the growers or the landowners would be to link the growers to the plants and to establish that the owner knew about the marijuana, especially for large open properties, federal agents said.

Kubo said six people were arrested in the sweep and the cases turned over to state and county authorities.

In addition to the plants, the sweep recovered 36 pounds of processed marijuana worth about \$6,000 a pound, authorities said.

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