

Debunking Environmental Myths

By Amy Steinfeld

Cannabis has been vilified for hundreds of years. While public perception has shifted drastically, a vocal minority continues to condemn this plant. Setting the record straight about the environmental benefits of California's legal cannabis industry is key. While illegal cannabis has contributed to environmental damage, legal sun-grown cannabis is not only sustainable, but tax revenues from these new operations are used to shut down unregulated, harmful grows. Here, I debunk five myths commonly cited by cannabis industry opposition.

Myth #1: Cannabis has been allowed to proliferate unchecked in Santa Barbara County

Cannabis is the most regulated crop in the state, but because it was only recently legalized and obtaining a permit requires compliance with hundreds of state and local regulations, it is taking County staff many months (or even years) to process these permits. Unlike other farmers, cannabis farmers must obtain a local land use permit and a state cannabis license, which require signoff from numerous agencies and implementation of robust mitigation measures. As part of this process, thousands of new trees have been planted in response to the county's landscaping requirements, unpermitted buildings have been retrofitted to meet current code requirements, farmers have cleaned up highly degraded soils with organic matter and cover crops, and energy and water conservation plans have been developed. As more farmers obtain permits and comply with stringent regulations, these environmental benefits will only increase, while allowing high-value land to remain in agricultural production.

Myth #2: Cannabis Uses a Lot of Energy

It's true that indoor cultivation requires significant energy to light up enclosed warehouses—up to 185 watts per square foot, according to a study by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. However, sun-grown cannabis relies only on the sun. While greenhouses often rely on artificial lights to supplement

the sun, their energy use is much lower than warehouse grows: those operating lights 30 to 50 percent of the year consume about 60 watts per square foot. Regulatory and technological advancements are underway that continue to reduce energy consumption and LED fixtures may be mandated by 2023.

Myth #3: Cannabis Uses a Lot of Water

Opponents often exaggerate the amount of water required to cultivate cannabis. The general rule of thumb is that cannabis plants grown outdoors consume one gallon of water per day per plant. Compare this to the estimated eight to 10 gallons of water per day per wine grape vine, according to the University of California, and one gallon suddenly doesn't seem like "a lot." In Santa Barbara County, cannabis can only be cultivated on 1,761 acres of land, compared to more than 16,000 acres of harvested wine grapes in 2018. Obviously water usage varies based on growing methods and conditions, e.g., climate, weather, soil type, but even if we assume cannabis uses six gallons of water per day per plant (an often cited stat), this still pales in comparison to the amount of water used to grow alfalfa for cows, which accounts for 18 percent of California's agricultural water use. Further, cannabis growers have installed high tech drip irrigation systems to comply with Santa Barbara County's and state's water conservation requirements.

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Myth #4: Cannabis Pollutes Our Public Lands

Illicit cannabis is often planted deep within national forests to avoid detection and adjacent to creeks for water supply. These unregulated grows are often sited on steep hillsides and doused with dangerous pesticides, contributing to water and habitat degradation. The beauty of the legal cannabis industry is that cannabis now can be cultivated openly, on land ideal for farming or by repurposing greenhouses. Cannabis cultivators are subject to some of the most stringent agriculture laws in California. For example, they are not permitted to use water from local creeks, and must protect water quality by preventing sediment and pollutant discharge into waterbodies.

Myth #5: Cannabis Cultivation Leads to Air Pollution

While it's true that cannabis plants release volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which sounds ominous—so do many other plants. VOCs only become dangerous to human health when they mix at high levels with nitrogen oxides (NOx) — emitted by cars and other industrial activity — to create ozone. Since greenhouses and outdoor cannabis farms are typically sited in rural areas with low traffic levels, they don't contribute to poor air quality. In fact, ozone levels in Carpinteria are at a record low! Fun Fact: Wine fermentation produces ethanol, which is also a VOC.

Cannabis farms also make great neighbors because they are strictly prohibited from using chemical pesticides or herbicides. To ensure the safety of consumers and the environment, cannabis has very strict pesticide, heavy metals, and mold testing requirements. One of the unintended, but beneficial, consequences of this stringent testing is that it has shed light on decades of illegal pesticide application. As a result, many farmers have started to take a closer look at spraying practices to reduce overspray, which benefits not just cannabis farmers, but also our schools and neighborhoods. In fact, many traditional farmers have demonstrated they can work collaboratively with neighboring cannabis farmers to reduce pesticide use and drift, a win-win.

Supporting legal cannabis ensures that medical and adult-users have access to clean, sustainable products, and that the environment is protected. Stifling the legal market will only lead to more illegal cultivation, environmental damage, and public health risks. 🌿

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