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Attorney: Pot shops getting illegal marijuana

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Multiple medical marijuana dispensaries are illegally acquiring black-market marijuana from out of state to meet exploding demand, a deputy Missoula County attorney who specializes in drug offenses said.

Andrew Paul said reports by agents at Montana's **High Intensity Drug Trafficking** Areas task force show the ballooning medical marijuana industry has created a market for illicit drug dealers who are diverting illegal marijuana to legally designated caregivers.

In Montana, designated caregivers are supposed to grow their own marijuana for qualified patients.

"I am certain that many local dispensaries do not grow enough medical marijuana to support their sales, so it seems that drug dealers have prospered from the sale of this medicine," Paul said. "All I can really tell you is that it's happening. Every single day marijuana is being brought to Montana from out of state to supply caregivers and their dispensaries."

He said he suspects that many dispensary operators were involved in illegal drug trade before Montana voters approved a medical marijuana ballot initiative in 2004.

"Some of these people had connections with drug dealers before the act passed, and now they're using those relationships to support a business," Paul said.

After the Obama administration announced last year that it would not prosecute medical marijuana users, the pace of registrations in Montana quickened, with the number of pot cardholders swelling over the past year from about 3,000 to 15,000.

Last month, 31-year-old Richard J. Biggs of Missoula was arrested on Interstate 90 on his way back from a four-day trip to Humboldt County, Calif., and police say they found 74 pounds of marijuana and \$39,500 in hundred-dollar bills.

A search of his vehicle turned up four duffel bags containing about 20 different strains of marijuana that court documents say match strains found in some dispensaries in Missoula.

"It is believed that several local dispensaries have been supplied with marijuana by Biggs through his black market deals originating in Northern California," the court documents filed in Missoula District Court said.

Biggs' has denied federal charges of conspiracy to distribute and possession with intent to distribute marijuana.

Authorities also found nine of marijuana at Biggs' home in Missoula and learned he owns a second home in Las Vegas. Biggs hasn't reported any income since 2007 when he was released from federal probation for a drug conviction.

In a different case, Andrew Burrington pleaded guilty recently in U.S. District Court in Missoula after prosecutors charged him with supplying large amounts of marijuana from out of state to at least one Missoula dispensary.

Paul said none of the dispensaries identified by authorities as receiving illegal marijuana have been shut down in Missoula County.

Officials note that medical marijuana dispensaries include respectable businesses that are relied on by legitimate patients seeking relief from pain, to improve sleep, or to increase appetite.

Information from: Missoulian, <http://www.missoulian.com>

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