

# Fresno County Sheriff Mims wants clear message: Pot is illegal

By Michael  
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Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims stands with local law enforcement agency members with a part of the evidence received in a marijuana growing and selling operation //in 2009. Meeting with hundreds of local, state and federal law enforcement officers during a high-profile week in Washington, D.C., for the president's anti-drug agenda, Mims on Thursday sought a clear, unalloyed statement that marijuana is illegal at the federal level and will stay that way.

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WASHINGTON — Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims wants more than money from the Obama administration, although money certainly helps.

She craves consistency, too. With politicians, of all stripes, that can be hard to come by.

Meeting with hundreds of local, state and federal law enforcement officers during a high-profile week for the president's anti-drug agenda, Mims on Thursday sought a clear, unalloyed statement that marijuana is illegal at the federal level and will stay that way.

"From the federal government, we keep getting mixed messages," Mims said.

The stern side was voiced Thursday morning by Michael P. Botticelli, the administration's nominee as director of the [Office of National Drug Control Policy](#). Currently the acting drug czar, Botticelli assured the assembled law enforcement officers that marijuana would remain classified as a tightly regulated Schedule I drug.

“The administration continues to oppose attempts to legalize marijuana and other drugs,” Botticelli told a House committee last year. “This opposition is driven by medical science and research.”

Botticelli’s official biography notes that he is “in long-term recovery from a substance use disorder, celebrating more than 25 years of sobriety.” His background is in preventing substance abuse, not law enforcement. The Senate Judiciary Committee approved him Thursday by voice vote, sending his nomination to the full Senate.

Attorney General nominee Loretta Lynch, currently the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, communicated a similarly hard-nosed approach toward pot during her own Senate confirmation hearing last week. Lynch told senators that [she opposes](#) marijuana legalization.

“I want to hear that message more,” Mims said.

A seemingly softer signal, though, comes from the Justice Department’s periodic declarations concerning federal marijuana laws. In 2013, then-Deputy Attorney General James Cole authored a three-and-a-half page [memo](#) directing officials to deploy their “limited investigative and prosecutorial resources” at the most significant threats. The implicit message was to let some usage slide.

Attorney General Eric Holder, in an [interview](#) last year with Yahoo’s Katie Couric, added his own assessment that whether it’s time to reclassify marijuana as being less dangerous than heroin, another Schedule I drug, is “certainly a question we need to ask ourselves.”

Underscoring the apparent conflict, House Republicans who convened a hearing on the subject last year pointedly titled the session “Mixed Signals: The Administration’s Policy on Marijuana.” But Congress has offered contrasting views.

A \$1.1 trillion spending bill passed by Congress and signed by Obama last December includes a provision authored by California Reps. Sam Farr, a liberal Democrat, and Dana Rohrabacher, a conservative Republican, that prohibits funds from being used to block state medical marijuana laws.

The same bill, though, included a separate provision designed to block pot legalization in Washington, D.C.

California and [22 other states](#) have legalized medical use of marijuana, and four states have legalized recreational use. It’s the most commonly used illicit drug in the country, with a 2001 survey estimating that 18.1 million U.S. residents had used it in the past month.

In Fresno County alone, law enforcement officers reported finding some 350 marijuana gardens last year, many secreted across the San Joaquin Valley floor. Although the state’s [Proposition 215](#) legalized cultivation for medical purposes, Fresno County last year banned pot growing in unincorporated parts of the county.

“It’s not about the medicine. It’s about the money,” Mims said. “It’s very lucrative.”

Mims spoke about her county’s experiences with marijuana before the [National High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Conference](#), several blocks from Capitol Hill. First created by Congress in 1988, the 28 designated HIDTAs span defined regions and provide federal funding to help coordinate law enforcement efforts.

Last year, the long-established [Central Valley HIDTA](#) spanning the area from Sacramento to Bakersfield grew with the addition of rural Siskiyou and Trinity counties. The California investigators’ work has earned national attention, with an award presented this week for one particular interdiction.

But while politically popular, the HIDTAs must also compete for funds. The Obama administration’s fiscal 2016 budget proposed this week would cut overall HIDTA funding to \$193 million from this year’s level of \$245 million. Last year, the administration proposed a nearly identical cut, and Congress rejected it.

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