

DEA raids medical marijuana farm

By Martha Mendoza
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SANTA CRUZ - Federal agents raided a marijuana farm Thursday and arrested the owners, who grow it for a medical users club, surprising community members and local law enforcement.

Officers seized more than 100 marijuana plants, three rifles and a shotgun in the pre-dawn raid, said Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman Richard Meyer in San Francisco.

Valerie and Michael Corral were arrested on federal charges of intent to distribute marijuana and conspiracy, he said.

"These are incredibly compassionate people who've worked closely with law enforcement to help the sick and dying in our community," said Ben Rice, an attorney for the Corrals. "This is absolutely outrageous."

Suzanne Pfeil, a patient at the club who was arrested during the raid and later released, said federal agents stormed her room around 8 a.m. in full assault gear, including helmets and semi-automatic weapons. They arrested everyone and uprooted the marijuana plants, she said.

Pfeil said the weapons the agents seized from the Corrals were merely unloaded family heirlooms.

"The only way to explain this is in a truly fanatical, inhumane ... spirit that

this was carried out," said Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance.

The Corrals helped write the provision in California's Proposition 215 that allows patients and their caregivers to cultivate their own medicine. The Corrals' farm has been featured in national media, and they work with local authorities to grow and distribute their pot to people with doctors' recommendations to use marijuana.

Mardi Wormhoudt, a Santa Cruz County supervisor, said county officials had been very impressed with the Corrals' professionalism in running the club.

The raid was a surprise to local medical marijuana growers and advocates, as well as the Santa Cruz County Sheriff and even DEA officials in the agency's closest office, in San Jose.

The marijuana farm about 15 miles north of Santa Cruz is well known to local law enforcement agencies, which have complied with the state medical marijuana law rather than federal drug laws, said sheriff's spokesman Kim Allyn.

"The DEA didn't tell us they did this, not before, and not after," he said.

Steven Reiniger, DEA task force officer in San Jose said he didn't know anything about the raid either.

DEA agents have repeatedly cracked down on high-profile medical marijuana advocates and distribution clubs recently in California, bypassing local law enforcement agencies that have condoned these activities.

In February, agents seized hundreds of plants from a San Francisco club

and arrested one of its suppliers, marijuana guru Ed Rosenthal, author of "Ask Ed: Marijuana Law. Don't Get Busted."

Federal agents also raided three other cannabis clubs in California, seizing a garden of marijuana in Hollywood and taking away the records of 5,000 medical marijuana users from a doctor's office near Sacramento.

Andrea Tischler, owner of the Compassion Flower Inn in Santa Cruz -- a bed-and-breakfast inn where guests with doctors' recommendations are allowed to use medical marijuana -- said she was outraged.

"We're absolutely shocked that the DEA would step in like this at harvest time when so many patients would be able to benefit from this medication," she said. "This is the one crop of the year they were growing."

About 200 patients are served by the Corral's Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana.

Santa Cruz has been at the forefront of medical marijuana efforts in California and nationally.

In 1992, 77 percent of Santa Cruz voters approved a measure ending the medical prohibition of marijuana. Four years later, state voters -- including 74 percent of those in Santa Cruz -- approved Prop. 215, allowing marijuana for medicinal purposes. And then again, in 2000, the city council approved an ordinance allowing medical marijuana to be grown and used without a prescription.