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## California Wildfire Not Started By Marijuana Farmers

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**California** - What sparked the enormous wildfire in and around Yosemite National Park is still a mystery, but officials for the first time revealed Wednesday that it was not caused by a marijuana-growing operation. U.S. Forest Service investigators took the unusual step of disclosing they had ruled out illegal weed farmers as the culprits after the top fire official of a town that had been in the path of the Rim Fire said in a video posted on YouTube that it was "highly suspected" that a marijuana farm might be to blame.

Todd McNeal, Twain Harte's fire chief, was not leading the investigation, but his comments received wide attention because officials had previously offered no hints of what could have started the fire.

Jerry Snyder, a spokesman for the Stanislaus National Forest, where the fire started Aug. 17 in a remote area called Jawbone Ridge, said investigators wanted to debunk "rumors" and "erroneous" information. He said there would be no way a group would be able to grow marijuana in that area.

"This is very steep, dry, inhospitable ground," Snyder said. "It's not conducive to growing marijuana in there."

There is also no direct access to water or a flat area for vehicles to ship in supplies and chemicals and haul out the marijuana, he said. Those same conditions hampered firefighting efforts, leading the fire to grow rapidly after it sparked.

Fire officials had previously said there were no lightning strikes in the area at the time, but Snyder declined to offer any alternative theories on the cause, citing the ongoing investigation. The probe could take a while: A fire in Stanislaus National Forest a year ago is still being investigated. And in some cases the cause of a wildfire is never determined.

At 371 square miles, the Tuolumne County fire remains the fourth-largest in California since the state began keeping records in 1932. But the wildfire's growth has slowed nearly to a halt in the last few days and was 80 percent contained by Wednesday. Hundreds of firefighters have been sent home, and most area residents have been told it's safe to return home. Full containment is expected within two weeks.

Written by San Jose Mercury News

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