

Column of January 31, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Pros of Legal Weed Outweigh the Cons"

NORML is a national group focused on decriminalizing marijuana. With offshoots in Jackson and Casper, NORML seeks to decriminalize cannabis in Wyoming by putting the matter to voters in 2016. NORML supporters plan a Walk for Weed on Monday, February 10, beginning at 9:00 AM, from the old Union Depot on 15th Street to the Capitol, where they'll march in circles around the building.

The group points out that, currently, more than 30 percent of the U.S. population lives under some form of marijuana decriminalization; studies show, these laws have not contributed to an increase in marijuana consumption nor have they negatively impacted adolescent attitudes toward drug use. NORML wishes to effect a policy that removes the consumer—the marijuana user—from the criminal justice system.

Marijuana is far less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco, states its website. Around 50,000 people die every year from alcohol poisoning while more than 400,000 deaths annually are attributed to tobacco smoking. By comparison, marijuana is nontoxic and cannot cause death by overdose. According to the prestigious European medical journal *The Lancet*, "It would be reasonable to judge cannabis as less of a threat . . . than alcohol or tobacco."

In that case, why wait until 2016 for Wyoming voters? Why not seek a legislative decision now?

I emailed my thoughts to Representative Sue Wallis R-Recluse, before she unexpectedly died earlier this week. Having observed firsthand the medical benefits of marijuana, had decided to bring a bill to this year's legislative session.

She replied, "With the good roll out of recreational in Colorado, I am contemplating a major revision to simply decriminalizing and regulating like alcohol.

"My thinking is, why set up a complete bureaucracy when what we really need is for people who want it or need it to have access?"

To date it is unclear whether a fellow legislator will pick up Ms. Wallis's bill.

Wyoming law enforcement makes the case that Colorado's move is bad news for underage users, whose developing brains are adversely affected by smoking pot. I agree with the regrettable effects; the same is true of other substances that youngsters use illegally. Unfortunately, some parents see nothing wrong in passing harmful substances to their children. Does that give Big Brother the right to penalize adults across the board?

A problem for the justice system, should Wyoming move to legalize cannabis, comprises people currently serving time in prison for the sale or distribution of marijuana. Would not their sentences have to be commuted, once the weed becomes legal? Law enforcement—and the private-prison system it feeds—can hardly be expected to be in favor of such "clienteles reduction."

A British reader residing in Cheyenne comments:

“For many years the British have flown to Amsterdam for pot tourism. Every time, the sniffer dogs identify them on their return, even if they have none on them. But Britain forgives small amounts of pot; so, after the tourists are checked that they do not have a stash, they get a pass.

“Not in Wyoming, where the smallest amount results in up to one year in jail plus a fine. Now that the weed is legal in Colorado, Wyoming law enforcement will check for marijuana coming in from our neighbor to the south.”

The writer observes that, inasmuch as legal marijuana businesses have trouble obtaining banking services, they often deal in large amounts of cash. This they take to grocery stores to exchange for money orders. “There will be more than enough residue on bank notes for a drug dog to detect, and then as an innocent person you are in defense mode. It will be up to you to prove your innocence to avoid prosecution.”

(And don't forget: Law enforcement has the right to tear apart your vehicle even when you do not consent to the search. Once a drug dog has sniffed "evidence," it makes your refusal nil and void. And when I say "tear apart," that's exactly what happens to your car's interior.)

Here's a boost to NORML and/or legislative efforts: Last August, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) in a memo to federal prosecutors nationwide issued mandatory guidelines not to sue or block states' laws legalizing marijuana. The announcement followed a DOJ decision to quit seeking federal mandatory minimum sentences for certain low-level nonviolent drug offenders. The memo expects states to enact regulations aimed at preventing marijuana sales to minors, illegal cartel and gang activity, interstate trafficking of marijuana, and violence and accidents involving the drug.

Marijuana advocates praised the decision as an important step toward ending the prohibition of the drug. Allowing states to legalize and regulate marijuana, they said, reduces jail populations and legal backlogs, creates thousands of jobs, and replenishes state coffers with marijuana taxes.

While voters in Washington and Colorado have approved measures decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of recreational marijuana, 18 other states and the District of Columbia permit the use of marijuana for medical purposes. Colorado voters also approved a 25% tax on recreational marijuana, which is expected to bring \$70 million in annual state revenue.

“It's a relief,” said Representative Jared Polis, a Colorado Democrat, of the DOJ decision. “It'll get the criminal element out of the marijuana trade. It'll provide legitimate business opportunities for everything from farmers to processors to retail store owners.”

Hence, you'll find me marching on February 10 alongside NORML enthusiasts.

