

Maine Lawmakers – and Voters – Still Hope to Legalize Recreational Marijuana

Maine lawmakers returning this month to Augusta, the capital, were already talking about the possibility of working with Gov. Paul LePage to finally act on voters' wishes to make recreational marijuana legal in Maine.

However, it's unclear how U.S. Attorney Jeff Sessions' plans for rescinding the Cole Memo will affect those talks. The Obama-era Justice Department memo essentially blocks the federal government from enforcing federal marijuana laws against cannabis businesses operating legally under state law.

Maine voters – along with voters in California, Massachusetts and Nevada – approved legalization of adult-use cannabis in November 2016. California began legal marijuana sales this month. Nevada started last July. Massachusetts plans to start in April.

But it hasn't happened in Maine. Last fall, LePage vetoed a bill that would have established adult-use sales. He cited a variety of reasons, mostly about bureaucratic process. For example, he said he wanted the state Bureau of Alcoholic Beverages and Lottery Operations to oversee marijuana sales, rather than the Department of Agriculture.

But few have forgotten LePage consulted with Sessions before vetoing the bill. And Sessions' move this week could further dampen any talks about legalized marijuana in Maine.

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LePage Video

It's instructive to watch a video LePage made about the issue just before Maine voters decided whether to approve legalized marijuana in November 2016. In the short video, LePage managed to criticize marijuana for everything from killing people on the highways to killing children and pets through cannabis edibles. He does not sound like a man ready to negotiate a compromise

"Marijuana is three times stronger than it was in the 1980s," he said in the video, adding, "We do not need to legalize another drug that could lead to more deaths. THC levels in marijuana snacks are so high they could kill children and pets."

He also said "people will smoke marijuana in pot stores right next to schools, day care centers and churches. They will smoke weed and sell pot at state fairs. Businesses could not fire employees for using marijuana."

Maine lawmakers who support marijuana legalization seem to already anticipate tough sledding with LePage. They told the Portland Press-Herald that if they cannot reach a compromise with LePage, they at least will aim to win over enough Republicans to override his veto.

They fell 17 votes short of that last year.

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Addressing Concerns

While the video makes clear LePage's opinion on legalized marijuana, none of that officially played into his decision to veto the bill. Instead, LePage said he had concerns about a confusing regulatory system and that legal marijuana would not

bring in enough tax dollars to pay for the system needed to regulate it.

He also said he had consulted with Sessions about concerns that legalized marijuana conflicts with federal law. Cannabis remains a Schedule I illegal drug at the federal level.

However, sales of medical marijuana have been legalized in more than half the U.S. states. A total of seven states have approved legal adult-use marijuana. They include Alaska, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon and Washington.

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