

Legalization could boost state economy

By: Aaron Loudenslager – January 21, 2013

It should be self-evident that the \$1 trillion war on drugs has failed to accomplish its goals. Although the creators and enforcers of American drug policy may have had good intentions, the consequences of this policy have not been so good. It is past time that the U.S. government reforms its federal drug policies. Furthermore, considering the recent legalization of recreational marijuana in Colorado and Washington, Wisconsin should join the movement of individual states legalizing recreational marijuana use.

In its pursuit of marijuana prohibition, it would behoove the federal government to be consistent in its own logic and actions in order to convince the American public that this goal is worthwhile.

Marijuana is prohibited under federal law and is classified as a Schedule I drug because according to the Controlled Substances Act, it has “no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States.” The federal government has had plenty of chances to reschedule marijuana into a different classification — given that 18 states and the District of Columbia have legalized medical marijuana since 1996, it seems there is not much truth to the declaration that marijuana has “no currently accepted medical use ... in the United States.” Even more illustrative of the contradictions in the logic and actions of the federal government’s marijuana policy is the fact that the U.S. government allowed cannabinoids—a chemical component in marijuana—to be patented as “antioxidants and neuroprotectants.”

The U.S. government can’t just declare one minute that marijuana has no medical use and then allow chemicals in marijuana to be patented for medicinal purposes at the same time; either it has medical use or it doesn’t.

Not only has the federal government been inconsistent in its own official reasons for prohibiting marijuana, it has been wrong in its general assumption that prohibiting drugs will stop drug use and production. As the Global Commission on Drug Policy reported in 2011, “The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world.” On the supply side of illicit drugs, federal prohibition doesn’t work because, as conservative economist Milton Friedman once wrote, “Illegality creates obscene profits that finance the murderous tactics of the drug lords; illegality leads to the corruption of law enforcement officials; illegality monopolizes the efforts of honest law forces so that they are starved for resources to fight the simpler crimes of robbery, theft and assault.”

Friedman is correct; making drugs illegal simply makes them more valuable for criminal enterprises to sell and distribute. This creates a perverse incentive for illicit drugs to be made more widely available, instead of achieving the intended goal of eradicating drugs. In addition, federal prohibition doesn’t necessarily reduce the demand for drugs. Since Portugal decriminalized drugs in 2001, illegal drug use has actually declined among teens and according to Glenn Greenwald from the Cato Institute

“[Portugal’s drug policy] has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country does.”

The citizens of Colorado and Washington recently legalized the recreational use of marijuana — thus rejecting the failed drug war — with full knowledge that doing so would be in direct conflict with federal law. Yet President Obama has said prosecution of these recreational users is not a top priority. This may be because Obama knows that marijuana will be fully legal throughout the U.S. in the future and does not want to be on the wrong side of history. Regardless, Gov. Scott Walker should be pushing the Wisconsin state legislature to legalize recreational marijuana use. He should go a step further than the medical marijuana proposals introduced by Rep. Mark Pocan which are being taken up by Rep. Chris Taylor in the upcoming legislative session.

During Walker’s tenure thus far, his main theme has consistently been about improving the Wisconsin economy and creating jobs. If Walker truly wants to improve the Wisconsin economy, then all proposals should be on the table. Legalizing recreational marijuana use in Wisconsin would save taxpayers money spent on law enforcement, prisons, judges, and lawyers and would also bring in new revenues through taxing marijuana sales. According to a report by economist Jeffery Miron, the U.S. would save \$7.7 billion in law enforcement costs annually from legalizing marijuana, with \$5.3 billion of that savings going to state and local governments. According to the same report, the U.S. would bring in new revenues of \$6.2 billion annually if legalized marijuana were taxed at rates similar to that of alcohol and cigarettes.

It is self-evident that the U.S. drug war has failed. It is only a matter of time before politicians decide to end it and create viable drug policies like those initiated in Portugal. In the meantime, Gov. Walker and our state legislature should legalize recreational marijuana use and tax its sale to improve the Wisconsin economy.