

Backlash fears delay US vote on marijuana

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Scott Reeves in New York

Moderate Democrats facing tough reelection battles in November and fearing a voter backlash have forced the leadership of the United States House of Representatives to postpone a vote on legalizing marijuana.

The Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement Act, or MORE Act, would legalize the drug federally and expunge some criminal records while leaving the decision on the sale of the psychoactive plant to the states.

The MORE Act raises basic questions about the role of government, its obligation to protect citizens from potential harm and the legal problems created by a marijuana arrest for what is increasingly seen as a matter of personal choice outside the purview of the law.

Proponents of legalization say current federal law treating marijuana as a controlled substance equal to cocaine or heroin is archaic and is comparable to Prohibition early last century.

Marijuana legalization supporters argue that current laws divert police from more important tasks and needlessly criminalize the actions of recreational users.

On Nov 3 voters in Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota will have a say on legalizing marijuana. In Mississippi, voters will decide whether to permit medical use of marijuana while keeping recreational consumption illegal.

Thirty-three states and the District of Columbia have legalized medical marijuana, and 11 states — Alaska, California, Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington and Vermont — have legalized sale of the drug for recreational use.

"Passage of the MORE Act is essential in order to truly right the wrongs of federal marijuana criminalization," said Paul Armentano, director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Law.

The bill is unlikely to come up for a vote before the election.

Adopted and pending marijuana legalization laws exclude persons under 18. Minors are prohibited from buying tobacco and alcohol but teenagers have no trouble obtaining cigarettes and beer. Would marijuana be different?

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, a nonprofit professional organization in Washington, DC, warns that even short-term marijuana use can cause serious health, learning and emotional problems.

Smoking marijuana can lead to the same breathing problems as cigarette use, including coughing, wheezing and lung cancer.

Marijuana often leads to decreased motivation that can be accompanied by a decline in academic performance and even lower intelligence.

Mental health problems in youth traced to marijuana use include depression, anxiety, anger, irritability, moodiness, risk of suicide and schizophrenia, the academy said.

Legalization opponents often argue that increased legal access to marijuana will result in higher rates of use, especially among teenagers.

However, researchers at the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank in Washington, said data provided by Statistics Canada show such fears are unfounded. Canada's decision to legalize marijuana in 2018 eliminated the need to buy the drug illegally.

"Shifting from an illicit to a licit market for marijuana is linked to reduced crime," the Cato researchers said.