

# GANNETT

## Alabama considers regulating marijuana

By: Jamie Haase – May 3, 2013

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Efforts to legalize marijuana have been in overdrive since November, when a majority of residents in Colorado and Washington deemed that the plant's consumption should be legally on par with alcohol. Now, several other states have followed suit in considering similar proposals, and Alabama is among them with House Bill 550.

The bill is modeled after Colorado's regulatory model, and its introduction in Montgomery earlier this year signals that genuine debate over marijuana reform has finally arrived in the buckle of the Bible Belt. This is great news for Alabamians, since responsible marijuana policy will bring the state enhanced public safety, an alternative natural medicine and a potential fortune from both industry and tax revenues alike.

As a former special agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement who worked on the Mexican border, I know firsthand that regulating marijuana would make the United States a more secure place. Our border with Mexico is 2,000 miles long and impossible to fully safeguard.

Considering Mexico's drug war is approaching its seventh year with no signs of slowing down, there's no telling how many criminals have fled that country and sought refuge here in the United States. What is certain, though, is the fact that revenues from marijuana trafficking account for the majority of profits earned by Mexican cartels. These criminal organizations have been responsible for more than 60,000 deaths since 2006, many of them taking place right on our doorstep and involving gruesome torture, hangings and decapitations.

There's no doubt that using the criminal justice system to try to reduce marijuana use is a drain on Alabama's already limited law enforcement resources. A clear illustration of this was the raid on Feb. 19 that netted 74 arrests at the University of Alabama. Rather than making Tuscaloosa a safer place to live by investigating robberies and murders, officers instead devoted two months to an investigation that only served to wreak havoc on the lives of otherwise innocent college students. These students, if convicted, may face jail time as well as barriers to financial aid, employment, housing and many other benefits for the rest of their lives. Are we any better off for it?

Alabama jails are overflowing and the state's Department of Corrections is housing more than 190 percent of its intended capacity. Meanwhile, marijuana arrests contribute to the overcrowding as they make up more than 50 percent of the state's drug arrests. This alone should show Alabamians that marijuana regulation is a smart economic decision when it comes to the fiscal future of the state.

As for the potential revenues that could be gained by regulating marijuana, Alabama spends nearly \$50 million annually on marijuana enforcement, according to a study by the Cato Institute. They also estimate that legalization would yield \$8.7 billion in taxes

nationwide. The illegal market created by marijuana is a multi-billion dollar industry, so with a smart taxation scheme, Alabama would make tons of money off the plant's regulation.

With a brand new poll from the Pew Research Center showing that 52 percent of Americans now want marijuana regulated like alcohol, it's clear that the issue isn't going away anytime soon — in Alabama or elsewhere. It's inevitable that legalization will eventually make its way to the South. The question is whether Alabama can be the first state down here to make that happen. Or will another one of the South's fertile states lead the way, making the safe, compassionate and fiscally sound decision to reform their marijuana laws?

Jamie Haase, a former special agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, is a member of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, a group of more than 5,000 police, prosecutors, judges and other law enforcement officials opposed to the war on drugs.