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Cannabis Activists Get High In Front Of The White House In Dramatic Drug Law Protest

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Hundreds of people who support marijuana legalization got high in front of the White House on Saturday in a demonstration aimed at getting cannabis removed from the federal government's most serious category of illegal drugs.

The mass protest, led by DCMJ, a D.C.-based marijuana group whose activists could be spotted wearing distinctive red, smurf-like ski hats, called for President Barack Obama to take marijuana off the list of Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act. The federal government classification given to the "most dangerous drugs" lumps marijuana in with more serious drugs like heroin, bath salts and LSD, allowing it to be prosecuted aggressively.

At around 4:20 p.m. Eastern time, which was chosen because of the number 420's association with weed, the protesters lit their joints, fired up their bowls and pulled on their vaporizers in unison with little disruption from the Secret Service or the local police. They even inflated a 51-foot plastic inflatable joint with the message "Obama, deschedule cannabis now" that was made by artists especially for the occasion.

Adam Eiding, a founder of DCMJ and leader of the 2014 campaign to legalize recreational marijuana in the District of Columbia, said that law enforcement initially refused to let the massive inflatable joint into Lafayette Square Park, but they were able to circumvent them by smuggling it in deflated and inflating it in the park.

"Just like good stoners everywhere, we snuck in a 51-foot joint, past the Secret Service," Eiding joked.

Smoking in public remains illegal in the district, despite a November 2014 vote to legalize it. It is illegal on federal land, including Lafayette Square Park and the pedestrian street in front of it, under any circumstances. Eiding had expected arrests to be made — even publicly expressing his readiness to be arrested for the cause.

But he had not heard of any arrests, he said, though some police citations were issued. The Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department could not immediately be reached to confirm the number of arrests or citations.

It was clear, however, that the D.C. cops largely turned a blind eye to public marijuana consumption. Several motorcycle-bound officers provided an escort for the group to march on K Street NW following the protest, during which many demonstrators smoked openly. Peter Tosh's "Legalize It" cannabis anthem blared from speakers as the parade went forward.

The march concluded at the corner of K Street NW and Vermont Avenue, where protest organizers had attacked a mock jail cell to the trailer post of an SUV in protest of the incarceration of marijuana smokers. A sign above the cage-turned-cell said "Jail Is Not A Drug Policy" in big red letters.

Obama has the constitutional authority to remove marijuana from Schedule I without the need for congressional approval. Switching it to Schedule III, for example, would allow marijuana businesses in states where the drug is legal to deduct business expenses, and restore access to student loans and public housing for convicted users, among other benefits, according to Ilya Shapiro, a legal scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Among the presidential candidates, only Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), a Democratic contender, has said he would remove marijuana from Schedule I as president. Sanders also introduced a bill in Congress in November that would legalize it completely.

Eidinger said that if Hillary Clinton wants to ensure high turnout from Sanders' supporters in the general election, endorsing the reclassification of marijuana would be a good way to do it.

"As a Bernie supporter, I do want to see a united Democratic Party, but you gotta give us something — this is like in the top three or four issues of Bernie supporters," Eidinger said, before excusing himself momentarily for a gulp of water.

"I'm a little cotton-mouthed, oh my God," he said.

Sanders was clearly the preferred candidate of rally attendees, many of whom sported "Bernie" pins and shirts.

Other activists described their involvement in down-ballot races. Zack Pesavento, 29, a veteran of the D.C. legalization campaign, is president of 420 USA Super PAC, a Super PAC dedicated to electing pro-legalization members of Congress. The group has plans to help unseat Rep. Andy Harris (R-Md.), one of the fiercest opponents in Congress of Washington, D.C.'s attempts to legalize the substance.

Sandra, a D.C.-based marijuana grower who was there with her husband, Josh, a certified arborist, said marijuana had been a godsend for her arthritis, sciatica and depression. They had left their two young boys with the kids' grandparents.

“The only harm that [legalization] would cause would be to the pockets of the pharmaceutical companies,” she said. “There are so many medications I don’t have to take because I smoke marijuana.”

Sandra said she appreciates concerns people have about how marijuana has grown more concentrated over the years — but to her, it only made the case for legalization more obvious.

“We need laws for it so we can regulate... so that people don’t have bad experiences,” she said.