

Oregon decriminalizing hard drugs

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — In a first in the nation, Oregon has rejected charging drug users with criminal offenses, with voters passing a ballot measure that decriminalizes possession of heroin, methamphetamine, LSD, oxycodone and other hard drugs.

“Today’s victory is a landmark declaration that the time has come to stop criminalizing people for drug use,” said Cassandra Frederique, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, which was behind the measure. “Measure 110 is arguably the biggest blow to the war on drugs to date.”

The measure completely changes how Oregon’s justice system treats those who are found with personal-use amounts of the hard drugs.

Instead of going to trial and facing possible jail time, a person would have the option of paying a \$100 fine or attending new “addiction recovery centers” funded by millions of dollars of tax revenue from Oregon’s legalized, regulated marijuana industry.

The passage of the measure makes Oregon, which in 1973 became the first state to decriminalize marijuana possession, a pioneer in America in trying the same with hard drugs. The measure takes effect 30 days after the election, but the punishment changes don’t take effect until February 1. Addiction recovery centers must be available by October 1.

It may sound like a radical concept, but the initiative’s backers said making criminals out of drug users — locking them up and burdening them with criminal records that made it difficult to find

housing and jobs — was not working.

One in 11 Oregonians is addicted to drugs, and nearly two people die every day from overdoses in the state, the Oregon Nurses Association, the Oregon Chapter American College of Physicians and the Oregon Academy of Family Physicians had said in support of the measure.

“We urgently need a change to save families and save lives,” they wrote.

About 3,700 fewer Oregonians per year will be convicted of felony or misdemeanor possession of controlled substances now that the measure has passed, according to estimates by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission.

The measure will also likely lead to significant reductions in racial and ethnic disparities in both convictions and arrests, the commission, which is an official state agency, said.

While this approach is new in the U.S., several countries, including Portugal, the Netherlands and Switzerland, have already decriminalized possession of small amounts of hard drugs, according to the United Nations.

Portugal’s 2000 decriminalization brought no surge in drug use. Drug deaths fell while the number of people treated for drug addiction in the country rose 20% from 2001 to 2008 and then stabilized, Portuguese officials have said.

“This is such a big step in moving to a health-based approach instead of criminal punishment, and we’re devoting significant new resources to help Oregonians who need it,” said Janie Gullickson, co-chief petitioner of Measure 110.

The measure was being approved by 59 percent of roughly 2 million votes counted so far, according to the secretary of state’s office.

Two dozen district attorneys said the measure was reckless and would lead to an increase in the acceptability of dangerous drugs. Two other district attorneys, including the one in Oregon’s most populous county and that includes Portland, backed the measure, as did a district attorney-elect.

The measure does not apply retroactively to past convictions, but there may be efforts through the Legislature to expunge those criminal records, which the Drug Policy Alliance would support, said its spokesman, Matt Sutton.

Oregon voters on Tuesday also legalized therapeutic use of psilocybin mushrooms, with a two-year development period. War veterans with PTSD, terminally ill patients and others suffering from anxiety had voiced support.

The measure requires the Oregon Health Authority to allow licensed, regulated production and possession of psilocybin, exclusively for administration by licensed facilitators to clients.

Before Tuesday’s elections, Oregon was among 11 states as well as Washington, D.C., that had legalized marijuana.

Several other states are following suit. Voters in Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota all approved ballot measures Tuesday legalizing marijuana for adults.

Winter driving conditions have arrived

Winter weather snuck up on Sisters Country and much of the West this week.

With the arrival of snow and freezing temperatures, Oregon State Police reminded drivers of the importance of some basic safety tips:

- First thing first, check your route and the weather. Use www.tripcheck.com for updated road closures and chain requirements.

- Drive slowly. Always adjust your speed down to account for lower traction when driving on snow or ice.

- Accelerate and decelerate slowly. Apply the gas slowly to regain traction and avoid skids. Don’t try to get moving in a hurry and take time to slow down for a stoplight.

- Remember: It takes longer to slow down on icy roads. Increase your following distance to five to six seconds. This increased margin of safety will provide the longer distance needed if you have to stop.

- Know your brakes. Whether you have anti-lock brakes or not, keep the heel of your foot on the floor and

use the ball of your foot to apply firm, steady pressure on the brake pedal.

- Don’t stop if you can avoid it. There’s a big difference in the amount of inertia it takes to start moving from a full stop versus how much it takes to get moving while still rolling. If you can slow down enough to keep rolling until a traffic light changes, do it.

- Don’t power up hills. Applying extra gas on snow-covered roads will just make your wheels spin. Try to get a little inertia going before you reach the hill and let that inertia carry you to the top. As you reach the crest of the hill, reduce your speed and proceed downhill slowly.

- Don’t stop going up a hill. There’s nothing worse than trying to get moving up a hill on an icy road. Get some inertia going on a flat roadway before you take on the hill.

- It is also a good idea to stay home and only go out if necessary. Even if you can drive well in bad weather, it’s better to avoid taking unnecessary risks by venturing out.

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