

# EARTH TALK™

Questions & Answers About Our Environment

**Dear EarthTalk:** I heard someone say that legalizing pot—as Californians considered doing last year—would benefit the environment. How would that be?

-- William T., Portland, OR

It is well known that legalizing pot could have great economic benefits in California and elsewhere by allowing the government to tax it (like it now does on liquor and cigarettes).

In addition, legalization would end expensive and ongoing operations to eradicate pot, and keep millions of otherwise innocent and non-violent marijuana offenders out of already overburdened federal and state prisons. But what you might not know is that legalizing pot could also pay environmental dividends as well.

Nikki Gloudeman, a senior fellow at *Mother Jones* magazine, reports on the [change.org](http://change.org) website that the current system of growing pot—surreptitious growers illegally colonizing remote forest lands and moving pesticides, waste and irrigation tubes into otherwise pristine ecosystems—is nothing short of a toxic scourge.

Legalizing pot, Gloudeman said, would clean things up substantially, as the growing would both eliminate the strain on public lands and meet higher standards for the use and disposal of toxic substances.

Legalization would also reduce the environmental impacts of smuggling across the U.S./Mexico border, said Gloudeman: "Cartels routinely use generators, diesel storage tanks and animal poison to preserve their cache,



Legalizing pot, some say, would eliminate many negative environmental impacts associated with clandestine growing and illegal smuggling. It would also likely open the door for the legalization of hemp (right-hand image), a relative of the cannabis plant that can't get you high but could help us sustainably meet a good amount of our fiber and fuel needs. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia)

when the border area is surrounded by more than 4 million acres of sensitive federal wilderness."

Also, legalizing pot would move its production out into the open, literally, meaning that growers would no longer need to rack up huge energy costs to keep their illegal indoor growing operations lit up by artificial light.

This means that the energy consumption and carbon footprint of marijuana growers would go way down, as the light the plants need for photosynthesis could be provided more naturally by the sun.

Yet another green benefit of legalizing marijuana would be an end to the destructive eradication efforts employed by law enforcement at bust sites, where the crop and the land they are rooted in

are sometimes subjected to harsh chemical herbicides for expedited removal.

The legalization of pot in the U.S. would also likely open the door to the legal production of hemp, a variety of the same Cannabis plant that contains much lower amounts of the psychoactive drug, THC. Proponents say hemp could meet an increasingly larger percentage of our domestic fiber and fuel needs.

Cannabis, the plant from which marijuana and hemp is derived, grows quickly without the need for excessive amounts of fertilizer or pesticide (it's a "weed" after all) and absorbs carbon dioxide like any plant engaged in photosynthesis.

The fiber and fuel derived from hemp would be carbon neutral and

as such wouldn't contribute to global warming—and in fact could help mitigate rising temperatures by replacing chemical-intensive crops like cotton and imported fossil fuels like oil and gas.

Of course, one might argue that the best thing for the environment would be to stop growing cannabis altogether. "But let's be real: That's never going to happen," said Gloudeman. "In light of that, the next best bet is to make it legal."

**CONTACTS:** Change.org, [www.change.org](http://www.change.org); Drug Policy Alliance, [www.drugpolicy.org](http://www.drugpolicy.org).

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