

NEWS

BY BEN RICKER



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SOBERING TIMES FOR LEGAL CANNABIS

JEFF SESSIONS BEING SWORN IN AT HIS
JANUARY CONFIRMATION HEARING

Marijuana is a crutch on which many were hoping to lean for the next four years.

That alone explains why our bronzed chief executive might be looking to snatch it away. Why else would President Donald J. Trump select unabashed marijuana-phobe Jeff Sessions to run the Department of Justice?

One of the country's most fervent foes of legal weed, the Republican senator from Alabama recently said that "good people don't smoke marijuana" and expressed our nation's need for "grown-ups in charge in Washington to say marijuana is not the kind of thing that ought to be legalized."

Sessions' nomination signals a possible end to a Drug War *entente* between federal law enforcement and states like Oregon where cannabis is legal. Since 2014, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has agreed to turn a blind eye to low-level marijuana infractions.

That's why members of Oregon's multi-million dollar cannabis industry are particularly sensitive to Sessions' fear-mongering bluster.

"He certainly got our attention," says TJ's Provisions part-owner Travis MacKenzie.

MacKenzie says, deep down, he isn't feeling much threatened: Marijuana business is a huge source of tax revenue in states where it's legal — Oregon's Department of Revenue reports that it raked in more than \$60 million in tax receipts last year — and the momentum behind legalization is too strong at this point to be easily quelled.

Eight states, along with the District of Columbia, have voted to decriminalize the recreational use of weed. And it's legally recognized as medicine in more than half the country.

A federal crackdown "would be terrible," MacKenzie admits. "I'm pretty much all-in on this." There's just not much else for him to do but wait and see how things shake out.

Founder and executive director of local cannabis testing facility OG Analytical Bethany Sherman is certainly aware Sessions is only a few minor hurdles away from heading Trump's DOJ, but says her office hasn't noticed any sign that the industry is slowing down or responding to danger.

Sherman says things in Oregon will stay the same until the DOJ updates its 2014 "Cole Memo," which lays out eight federal guidelines for states that have legalized recreational marijuana. The memo stipulates that pot should be kept out of the hands of minors, its revenue should not fund criminal enterprise, and transfer of marijuana across state lines is prohibited.

Sherman says the best thing for everyone to do is stay focused on keeping Oregon's cannabis industry as clean as possible — which, she admits, is no mean feat for fledgling businesses still coming to grips with newfangled state regulations.

Growers and sellers in Eugene say the Oregon Health Authority mints new rules on an almost weekly basis, and staying in line with regulation is neither cheap nor easy.

If the feds go after marijuana, MacKenzie says, it could lead to an uncomfortable discussion at the highest levels of government about the controversial place marijuana currently holds on a short list of Schedule I drugs.

Schedule I substances are those considered by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency to be dangerous and addictive with no medical benefit. Scientific study is making it harder all the time to argue that marijuana belongs on the same list of banned substances as heroin and LSD.

Anecdotal evidence indicating the medical benefits of cannabis is plain to see, MacKenzie says.

Aside from two recreational pot dispensaries, MacKenzie and his business partners set up a program a couple years ago that supplies cannabidiol treatments free of charge to more than 100 youngsters who suffer from epileptic seizures. MacKenzie says some of the children enrolled used to suffer daily seizures. Regular doses of CBD have brought the number of spells down to only a few every month.

The science is stacking up firmly on the side of the industry, MacKenzie says. "From no angle can you defend [marijuana's Schedule I classification]. It's pretty to clear to everyone at this point that it doesn't stand."

If only the current administration was bound by facts.

If it does become a fight, MacKenzie says, it could do tremendous damage across the country.

"This is my livelihood," MacKenzie adds. "Also we made a promise to a bunch of kids, and we intend to keep it."

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