

From VOA Learning English, This is As It Is.

Welcome back! I'm Caty Weaver. Growing marijuana and marijuana use are illegal in the United States under federal law. However, eighteen states and the nation's capital, Washington, DC, permit the use of marijuana for medical treatment. Just last week, President Obama joked about his own marijuana use as a college student. So it seems positions toward pot are changing.

Last year, voters in two western states approved the recreational use of small amounts of the drug. In other words, people can smoke it for fun, much like the way they can use alcohol.

On our show today, we examine some of the measures being proposed to govern the production and sale of marijuana. And we visit the state of California to hear what people there think of the marijuana laws in other states.

Officials in Seattle, Washington expect their state's new marijuana law to help the pot business grow into a multi-million industry within months. Avi Arditti tells about how this expansion might develop and what controls might be placed on it.

Patients flow in and out of The Joint, a marijuana supply center in Seattle. Owner Shy Sadis provides the drug in many forms, including marijuana-based baked goods, like cookies, and soft drinks.

Mr. Sadis hopes to expand his business to recreational pot users.

“All around Washington, and eventually someday, possibly in Oregon, California, Colorado, wherever cannabis is legal.”

Medical marijuana requires a recommendation from a doctor. Marijuana supply centers, known as dispensaries, are set up as non-profit businesses. But, Washington state lawmaker Roger Goodman says a different business model is being created for recreational marijuana.

“We have to have regulations that put in place means to produce cannabis, to process it and to sell it, that’s economical enough to be sold at a price that’s lower than the black market, and yet that is high enough to deter youth consumption.”

Under the new Washington state law, adults 21 and older can possess about 28 grams of the drug. However, there is still no legal way to buy marijuana, except for medical use. A production, sales and supply system is to be put in place later this year.

Recreational marijuana could be heavily taxed and the industry could be huge. State and local officials hope to gain hundreds of millions of dollars to help finance government spending.

At the same time, local governments may save money from not having to investigate, try and jail marijuana users. Pete Holmes is a lawyer with the Seattle city government. He says whites have been treated differently from racial minorities in connection with marijuana control laws. He first noted this when he took office in 2010.

“And that was an eye opening experience for me, because of all the pending cases. 59 to 60 percent were against African-Americans in a city with a seven percent African-American population. And a progressive city, I would add.”

Psychologist Steve Freng works for a combined federal and local law enforcement program called the Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. He says many questions about the new law have yet to be answered.

“How demand may increase, how consumption and purchasing may increase, how it’s going to impact folks under 21 years old, in much the manner that we are dealing with underage drinking right now.”

He says at least ten percent of marijuana users could become dependent on the drug. Most marijuana supporters agree that pot is a psychotropic substance. They admit it can temporarily change behavior and thinking. They say it is not something everyone should use. But they also argue it is safer than alcohol.

Sixty-eight year old James Higgins is a medical marijuana user. He supports the legalization of the drug.

“They will put no more people in jail for an ounce of weed (marijuana) or a couple of joints (marijuana cigarettes). Yes, I think it’s a good deal that it is legalized. It is going to help the economy and the people.”

No one knows how federal law enforcement will react to the new state laws in Washington and Colorado. The United States Department of Justice has promised a statement soon. Lawyer Pete Holmes hopes officials will wait and see how these social experiments develop.

I’m Avi Arditti.

Now we turn to California. Officials there are watching the marijuana law developments in Washington State closely. And the people of California are debating the limits of marijuana use. Kelly Jean Kelly has more.

Harborside Health Center is the nation’s largest supplier of medical marijuana. The Oakland, California, dispensary pays millions of dollars each year in state and local taxes. Oakland city officials support the work of the center. Harborside has also paid millions of dollars in legal costs to fight federal efforts to close it. But, co-founder Steve DeAngelo says the move toward nationwide legalization of marijuana has begun.

“The real question is, how is it going to be legalized? What is this new industry going to look like? How are we going to regulate it?”

The city of Los Angeles already has more than 1,000 unsupervised marijuana dispensaries and more are opening. Even supporters of the centers say the situation is out of control. A simple headache, or difficulty sleeping, can result in a doctor’s recommendation for medical marijuana.

Bill Rosendahl is a member of the Los Angeles city council. He says marijuana has helped him deal with cancer. He supports a proposal called Proposition D. It would reduce the number of dispensaries in Los Angeles to 135. Mr. Rosendahl says it would protect and bring order to an industry that has helped him.

“I feel strong. I feel I’ve got a long life ahead of me and I want to thank medicinal marijuana for making it happen.”

Public opinion surveys have shown that 70 percent of Californians support medical marijuana. A narrow majority supports fully legalizing the drug, as Colorado and Washington have done. But the drug is still illegal under federal law.

Today’s marijuana is powerful. Psychologist Steve Freng works with drug treatment programs in the Seattle area for the federal government. He says pot contains more of the psychoactive chemical THC in it now than it did in the past.

“Marijuana these days is not the marijuana that was out there when I was in high school and college. That was essentially Mexican ditch weed that, that, if you were lucky, was a three to five percent THC type of marijuana.”

Modern marijuana can have 15 to 20 percent THC and, as with alcohol, there are problems of abuse and use by children.

But the debate here is not about banning the drug, says marijuana dispensary founder, Steve DeAngelo.

“It’s no longer a question about where or not cannabis is going to be legalized. It’s not even a question of when, because we’re in that moment right now.”

He says the question now is how marijuana will be legalized. And, Americans are waiting for an answer from federal officials.

I’m Kelly Jean Kelly.

And that’s As It Is for today. I’m Caty Weaver. Thanks for joining us.