

Cannabis: Jared Moffat, RI Point-Man for Legalization



Jared Moffat of Regulate RI and the Marijuana Policy Project

Most lists of states likely to end prohibition within the next couple of years do not include Rhode Island, mainly because there is no opportunity for popular initiative referenda on the ballot, the proven route to success so far elsewhere: If Rhode Island is going to do it, the impetus will have to come from within the General Assembly. The state legislature in Vermont, also with no popular initiative, is expected to seriously consider legalization next year. Massachusetts and Maine are widely expected to legalize in 2016 by popular initiative referendum (“Opinion: Will Rhode Island Surrender Yet Another Industry?” <https://motifri.com/opinion-will-rhode-island-surrender-yet-another-industry/> by Michael Bilow, Jun 4, 2015), creating pressure on neighboring New England states. Political information site Ballotpedia is currently tracking 29 initiatives in various stages of progression toward the 2016 election ballot - http://ballotpedia.org/Marijuana_on_the_ballot#2016 - although 10 are competing within the same state, California.

By all estimates, 2016 looks to be the political turning point for ending marijuana prohibition where enough geographically dispersed and populous key states could form a critical mass that push the country toward a national consensus.

Jared Moffat has long been the point-man for ending marijuana prohibition in Rhode Island (“In Their Own Words: Jared Moffat, Director of Regulate Rhode Island” <https://motifri.com/in-their-own-words-jared-moffat-director-of-regulate-rhode-island/> Apr 15, 2015) as director of Regulate RI <http://www.regulateri.com/> and the state’s political director for the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP) <https://www.mpp.org/states/rhode-island/> national lobbying group.

Moffat has said that his main focus now is the Marijuana Regulation, Control, and Taxation Act <https://www.mpp.org/states/rhode-island/marijuana-regulation-control-and-taxation-act/> in the Rhode Island General Assembly that would treat cannabis for adult use similarly to alcohol. “We feel that we have a lot of support among the rank-and-file in both the Senate and the House, and the challenge is really to simply get this on the agenda of the leadership, and to do that we are going to be focusing our efforts on the case to regulate and legalize marijuana for adults before other states do so.”

“Our main argument to legislators and especially to the leadership is, look, even if you’re against legalization, most folks feel that this is something that’s inevitable. We’ve seen four states now move forward with this. We’re likely to see a number of other states do so. The politics around the issue have

just completely changed ... so the writing's on the wall. The question becomes: If it is inevitable, should we do it sooner or later?" Moffat said.

Legalizing before neighboring states would give Rhode Island a significant boost, Moffat argues. "There are a lot of reasons why Rhode Island should become an early adopter, primarily ... economic reasons and this is something that the leadership in both chambers, especially the speaker of the House [Nicholas Mattiello] has made it a point to say - that his number one priority is to create jobs, bring new investment into the state, and build Rhode Island's economy ... We think we can fit our issue into that framework by pointing out that whichever state goes first is going to attract more business to their state, they're going to give the entrepreneurs from the medical cannabis domain a head start over other entrepreneurs in other states ... If tourism is allowed then there would be a huge influx, obviously, of people from neighboring states, maybe even as far as New York, coming to Rhode Island and not just legally purchasing marijuana but also benefiting restaurants, lodging and other tourism-related services," he said.

Failing to act this year, Moffat said, would have a significant downside. "There's a lot to gain by being the first, whereas in the other scenario if Massachusetts, for example, moves forward in 2016 but Rhode Island doesn't, and they [General Assembly] sort of punt again on this issue, then what we're going to see is a lot of Rhode Island residents crossing the border and spending their money in Massachusetts, and Massachusetts is going to collect that tax revenue, they're going to see job growth, they're going to see investment ... Meanwhile, Rhode Island is going to be left out of that."

Moffat said that he has been unable to identify the contrary argument, but is usually given vague explanations such as "it's not on the agenda right now" or "we're going to study it later." However, he said, "I've had people very much opposed to legalization tell me that they think it's inevitable, and I think it's pretty remarkable that even the people who are not happy about it admit that it's inevitable.

"You don't have to like marijuana to support regulation because, the fact of the matter is, marijuana is here whether you like it or not, whether you prohibit it or not. Because there's demand for it there's going to be a supply and right now, because we refuse to regulate it, criminals are profiting off of the illicit market that we've created in that vacuum ... It's about what type of policy you think makes the most sense. Do you want control over how marijuana is sold and when it's sold and to whom it's sold?" Moffat said. "We've had decades of prohibition to see that's not an effective way to deal with it.

"Our next step is to really ramp up our efforts to convince the leadership of the legislature that this should be very much a part of their plan to revitalize Rhode Island's economy, and the way we're going to try to do that is to [bring in] business owners here in Rhode Island who either are involved already in medical cannabis or people who have capital and want to invest in this new cannabis economy. We want to show that there are outside businesses in other states and in other places that would be willing to invest in Rhode Island if we move forward with this." Moffat said that Legislators need to "...actually talk with people who can say 'Here's my business plan, here's how many people I'm going to hire, and here's how much tax revenue the state's going to get from my business.' Because I think they've heard this sort of abstract argument and our challenge is to make that real for them."

Motif videos:

Regulate RI at Brown University: Ending Marijuana Prohibition. Nov 18, 2014 - http://www.dailymotion.com/playlist/x3hlkm_motifmag-mb_regulate-ri-forum-ending-marijuana-prohibition/1#video=x2appe1

“Politics and Activism” panel B at the New England Cannabis Convention, Providence, RI. May 17, 2015

-

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2r5a47_new-england-cannabis-convention-politics-and-activism-panel-b_news