

The New England Green Rush — Tip of the Legalization Spear

As the November midterm elections approach, the Northeast is poised to be the new tip of the spear for the legalization movement. While Portland, Oregon, saw marijuana reform defeated in 2012, its uglier but much cooler twin sister, Portland, Maine, legalized recreational use the following year. In 2014, New Hampshire passed medical marijuana laws, making it the 19th state to pass such legislation, only two years after Massachusetts passed a similar bill. Decriminalization and medical marijuana laws also have been implemented in Rhode Island, Vermont, and Connecticut, where they have taken medical marijuana production to a pharmaceutical level. It is within this bastion of progressive thinking and libertarian ideology where I truly see the next big impact of the legalization movement taking place.

Let's review Connecticut, where the first of six medical marijuana dispensaries, Prime Wellness, opened last August. The other six dispensaries are set to open over the next couple of months, but judging by the success in other states where dispensaries have been actively distributing marijuana to approved patients, this small step should provide much anticipated revenue for cultivators, facility owners and the state. Once communities start to see the stigma associated with marijuana use lessen, it won't be long before Connecticut residents are champing at the bit for a piece of the much larger revenue stream associated with recreational use, as demonstrated by Colorado earlier this year.

Dispensaries also opened in Massachusetts this year, providing the groundwork for a ballot initiative spearheaded by the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP) out of Washington, D.C.. MPP was largely responsible for the legalization initiatives passing in Colorado and Washington last year. Now they are focusing on the Northeast where they opened a ballot referendum committee with Massachusetts' Office of Campaign and Political finance. MPP director of communications, Mason Tvert, expressed the desire to build a coalition focused on creating legislation for legalization and regulation of marijuana, which duplicates that which was successfully implemented in Colorado. He intends to take the issue to the ballot if state legislation is unwilling to cooperate.

In Little Rhodie, we unfortunately don't have the privilege of a public vote on the issue. Things here must be done through a legislative process, where community action groups like Regulate RI, RIPAC and LEAP, among others, have been working in force to convince local politicians that legalization and regulation are the direction that constituents in this small state want to go. Though local polls show that over 53 percent of Rhode Islanders support laws to tax and regulate marijuana, RI officials have declined to vote on the subject for the past three years, holding the introduced bill for further study. Going into midterm elections, however, there has been a show of tri-partisan support for the legalization movement ranging from democratic hopefuls like Todd Giroux, Gina Raimondo and Clay Pell to Republican Daniel Harrop and even Buddy Cianci, who admits to influential groups in the statehouse that still believe erroneously that marijuana is a gateway drug. I look to 2015 for a reemergence of a recreational bill that will hopefully be supported by a fresh crop of political allies who are willing to let old stigmas die.

Finally, we can revisit the success that the individual municipalities have had in Maine. Following Portland's lead, where recreational use within city limits passed the vote with flying colors, three other localities (Lewiston, South Portland and York) agreed to let the public take matters into their own hands

on November 2. Despite opposition from state government, law enforcement, and the Maine chapter of Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM), all three initiatives are gaining popular support and making steady headway going into the 2014 midterms. If all goes well, Maine could have four successful models for building and supporting a measure to tax and regulate marijuana in 2016.