

## Medical marijuana barely dents Mexican drug trade

Dan Freedman, Hearst Washington Bureau

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Domestic pot production and the proliferation of medical dispensaries have affected California's previously strong appetite for Mexican marijuana but have had minimal impact on Mexican traffickers' marijuana revenues.

Fifteen years after voters approved [Proposition 215](#), permitting medicinal marijuana use, strong varieties like those produced in Northern California's so-called Emerald Triangle dominate the market. Weaker Mexican pot, once the weed of choice for the 1950s Beat generation and the 1960s flower children, is less popular, according to drug policy experts and law enforcement officials.

But overall, sales of Mexican marijuana continue to earn that nation's violent drug cartels as much as \$2 billion a year.

In addition to California, 14 states have laws permitting medical marijuana.

With approximately 1,700 dispensaries catering to between 300,000 and 400,000 customers, California is ahead of the other states with similar laws in building a soft-legal medical marijuana infrastructure.

Outlets such as the San Francisco Patient and Resource Center market varieties with catchy names like Purple Train Wreck and Big Buddha Cheese, sometimes describing their qualities in language more commonly applied to fine wines: "The sweet nose on these buds matches perfectly with the sweet taste."

### Cartels

None of this has deterred the Mexican cartels, which derive approximately 15 to 26 percent of their revenues from marijuana, according to a Rand Corp. analysis last year.

The amount of marijuana seized along the entire Southwest border jumped 44 percent between 2005 and 2009, federal statistics show.

In November, the month California voters defeated the prospect of legalized marijuana in Proposition 19, drug agents trumpeted the discovery of two cross-border tunnels between Tijuana and Otay Mesa (San Diego County), and seizure of 50 tons of pot.

"Marijuana is by far the most seized drug at the Southwest border, and it continues to serve as the cash cow of the drug cartels in Mexico," said Rusty Payne, spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Average street-sale prices of Mexican marijuana in Los Angeles rose 60 percent between 2006 and 2010 while domestic more than doubled, according to DEA data. "Most of the marijuana we see in Los Angeles is domestically produced," said DEA spokeswoman Sarah Pullen. "There is a percentage of Mexican and Canadian (marijuana), but the vast majority is domestic."

The agency's spokeswoman in San Francisco, Casey McEnry, said a similar situation existed in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Before [Proposition 19's](#) defeat at the polls, those in favor argued that legalization would undercut the Mexican traffickers' marijuana business.

Those opposed, including law enforcement groups, countered that cartels would not let legalization deter them from finding and exploiting U.S. markets.

"Most of the marijuana used throughout the U.S. is still commercial grade, but that ratio is much less in California," said Beau Kilmer, lead author of the Rand report and co-director of the think tank's Drug Policy Research Center. "Use of (domestically grown) high-grade stuff is higher in California than elsewhere in the U.S."

The Rand report concluded that legalization in California would at most reduce Mexican traffickers' income by between 2 and 4 percent on marijuana revenues estimated at between \$1.1 billion and \$2 billion annually.

Mexican cartels have responded by growing often-stronger marijuana on public land within the United States.

**Luxury market**

Domestic cultivation's uptick has created a bifurcated market of connoisseurs with the money to afford high-test grades sold in dispensaries or the illicit market, and more frugal consumers willing to sacrifice potency for price.

"People smoke it because it's cheap, not because it's any good," said Mark Kleiman, professor of public policy at UCLA.

Medical marijuana has given rise to a virtual agribusiness producing genetically engineered strains targeted at consumers.

Some varieties are described as strong enough to produce "couch lock," and are recommended for nighttime pain relief. Others are said to be less heavy, more appropriate for daytime use, and helpful for headaches and "social anxiety."

Consumers "in effect have become folk scientists on what works best for them," said Craig Reinerman, chairman of the sociology department at the UC Santa Cruz.

George Mull, president of the California Cannabis Association, the dispensaries' trade association, says that when he attends public gatherings, "people of color are only slightly represented." Mexican marijuana, he said, "often is aimed at inner cities, particularly youth."

He added: "Your typical Berkeley intellectual ... is very unlikely to cross paths with the Mexican cartels. It just doesn't happen."

### **State laws**

States with laws permitting medical marijuana and when they were adopted:

Alaska (1998)

Arizona (2010)

California (1996)

Colorado (2000)

Hawaii (2000)

Maine (1999)

Michigan (2008)

Montana (2004)

Nevada (2000)

New Jersey (2010)

New Mexico (2007)

Oregon (1998)  
Rhode Island (2006)  
Vermont (2004)  
Washington (1998)  
(Also permitted in District of Columbia in 2010)  
Source: ProCon.org

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