

Ballot initiative is pot industry's next move in California

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

A proposed ballot initiative aimed for the November elections begs a key question looming over California's medical marijuana industry: Can stricter state regulation keep the federal government from shutting it down?

Dispensaries, medical marijuana growers and a powerful union local are rallying behind an initiative that would regulate California's \$1.5 billion pot trade.

They predict they will be able to raise \$2 million from medical marijuana businesses and drug policy groups to qualify the measure for the November ballot. A drive to gather a required half-million valid voter signatures could begin this week after Attorney General Kamala Harris completes a legal summary and petitions are certified by Secretary of State Debra Bowen.

California's medical marijuana economy is mostly governed by local governments, often with conflicting rules. The proposed initiative, the "Medical Marijuana Regulation, Control and Taxation Act," would largely put the state in charge.

It would establish a medical marijuana enforcement bureau in the Department of Consumer Affairs. A commission – with majority representation from the medical cannabis community – would oversee the enforcement bureau, license dispensaries and marijuana cultivators, and set standards for the pot trade.

The effort is a political compromise by wary factions.

The "Emerald Growers Association" from the Humboldt and

Mendocino counties pot country signed on after initiative backers rejected a model based on the dispensary-run pot growing centers used in Colorado. The group wanted assurances that rural outdoor pot cultivators wouldn't be cut out of the market by urban indoor growers.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 5, which two years ago backed the Proposition 19 effort to legalize marijuana for recreational use, signed on to the new initiative after deciding it was the best option to protect union jobs in the pot industry.

The effort also includes Americans for Safe Access, an Oakland-based advocacy group for medical cannabis users that stayed out of the Proposition 19 fight.

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