

Calif. pot legalization efforts under way

By Lisa Leff, AP

SAN FRANCISCO – A national marijuana advocacy group took steps Wednesday to begin raising money for a campaign to legalize recreational pot use in California in 2016, a move with potential to add a dose of extra excitement to the presidential election year.

The Marijuana Policy Project filed paperwork with the California secretary of state's office registering a campaign committee to start accepting and spending contributions for a pot legalization initiative on the November 2016 state ballot, the group said.

The measure would be similar to those passed in 2012 by voters in Colorado and Washington, the first U.S. states to legalize commercial sales of marijuana to all adults over 21.

California, long the national leader in illegal marijuana production and home to a thriving, largely unregulated medical marijuana industry, is one of the 21 other states that currently allow marijuana use only for medical reasons. The drug remains illegal under federal law.

"Marijuana prohibition has had an enormously detrimental impact on California communities. It's been ineffective, wasteful and counterproductive. It's time for a more responsible approach," Marijuana Policy Project Executive Director Rob Kampia said. "Regulating and taxing marijuana similarly to alcohol just makes sense."

The Washington, D.C.-based group also has established campaign committees to back legalization measures in Arizona, Massachusetts and Nevada in 2016.

Voters in Oregon, Alaska and the District of Columbia will weigh in on marijuana legalization in November.

In 2010, California voters rejected a ballot initiative seeking to legalize recreational pot. The measure, just like the medical marijuana law the state approved in 1996, was the first of its kind. But along with opposition from law enforcement and elected officials, Proposition 19 faced unexpected resistance from medical marijuana users and outlaw growers in the state's so-called Emerald Triangle who worried legalization would lead to plummeting marijuana prices.

Marijuana Policy Project spokesman Mason Tvert predicted no such divisions would surface this time around.

Citing his group's experience in Colorado and the advantage of aiming for a presidential election year when voter turnout is higher, Tvert said legalization supporters would use the next two years to build a broad-based coalition and craft ballot language that addresses concerns of particular constituencies.

"Obviously, it's a whole different landscape in California, where it will cost probably as much or more to just get on the ballot as it did to run a winning campaign after getting on the ballot in Colorado," he said.

League of California Cities lobbyist Tim Cromartie, whose group opposed the state's 2010 pot legalization initiative and until this year fought legislative efforts to give the state greater oversight of medical marijuana, said Wednesday that it was too soon to say what kind of opposition, if any, would greet a 2016 campaign.

Lynne Lyman, California director of the Drug Policy Alliance, said her group expects to play a major role in the legalization effort and already has started raising money. Lyman said the goal is to have an initiative written by next summer. She estimated that a pro-legalization campaign would cost \$8 million to \$12 million.

Even though California would be following in the steps of other states if a 2016 initiative passes, legalizing recreational marijuana use there would have far-reaching implications, Lyman said.

“When an issue is taken up in California, it becomes a national issue,” she said. “What we really hope is that with a state this large taking that step, the federal government will be forced to address the ongoing issue of marijuana prohibition.”