



The Gazette

SPECIAL REPORT, 'CLEARING THE HAZE:' BLACK MARKET IS THRIVING IN COLORADO

PULA DAVIS, WAYNE LAUGESSEN AND CHRISTINE TATUM | MARCH 23, 2015

“Colorado is the black market for the rest of the country,” HIDTA Director Tom Gorman said. “Now, the state just has a so-called legal market competing with the cartels, which haven’t missed a beat. All ships rose with this tide.”

A shrinking black market for marijuana was among the biggest benefits Colorado would realize from legalizing and regulating the drug, proponents of Amendment 64 promised in the months leading up to the state’s historic decision to sanction pot’s recreational use.

However, the black market is thriving — and growing in new, unforeseen ways as marijuana, highly potent THC concentrates and THC-infused foods and drinks produced in Colorado make their way across the country.

More than 40 states have reported seizures of Colorado marijuana and THC products, according to the Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. The federally funded task force also reports that seizures involving Colorado marijuana bound for other states have risen nearly 400 percent, from 58 incidents in 2008 to 288 in 2013 — the year before Colorado’s marijuana retail stores opened. That is consistent with Denver police records showing a nearly 1,000-percent spike in the amount of marijuana officers have seized — 937 pounds in 2011 compared to a little more than 4 tons last year.

El Paso, Denver and Boulder counties are the top three sources for out-of-state marijuana trafficking, the HIDTA reports.

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Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman spoke in similarly stark terms when meeting with fellow state attorneys general at a professional conference in February. She lambasted marijuana legalization advocates’ linchpin argument that marijuana producers and users would play by the rules of law and significantly wrest control of marijuana sales from drug traffickers and cartels.

“Don’t buy that,” she told the room. **“The criminals are still selling on the black market. ...We have plenty of cartel activity in Colorado (and) plenty of illegal activity that has not decreased at all.”**

Mexican cartels remain big players in Colorado’s illicit drug trade, working their turfs as usual. Only now, because American marijuana users increasingly are turning to the more potent forms of pot produced at home,

the cartels are changing tactics to capitalize on other profitable drug sales. Mexican drug producers have shifted their crops from marijuana to opium poppies — which produce the black tar heroin that has ravaged many parts of the country — and they're ramping up production of methamphetamine. Last year, U.S. law enforcement agencies seized more than 2,100 kilograms of heroin coming from Mexico — almost triple the amount confiscated in 2009 — and about 15,800 kilograms of meth, up from 3,076 kilos in the same period, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency. The DEA estimates that about 90 percent of meth sold in the U.S. is produced in Mexico.

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Americans' consumption of all three drugs — marijuana, meth and heroin — is on the rise, and Colorado's use rates are higher than the national average, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which is funded by a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services agency.

"The cartels are flooding our markets with cheap heroin and meth at the same time we're growing the numbers of marijuana users who might move on to try that next thing," said Ernie Martinez, national at-large director for the National Narcotic Officers' Associations Coalition. **"Nothing good will come from this."**

Colorado's black-market marijuana trade is hardly limited to cartels — and state officials can't say how much marijuana flows through it. However, they estimate that only 60 percent of the marijuana consumed in Colorado is purchased through legal channels. The rest is sold through illicit operations that include back-door sales out of warehouses and other licensed facilities and home-grow operations far exceeding the six-plant limit Colorado law allows those 21 and older to cultivate. ■

Rest of article here. <http://goo.gl/eSpEkO>

OPPOSE the Decriminalization of Marijuana SB 753 & HB 218



P.O. Box 88848 | Carol Stream, Illinois 60188
708-781-9328 | ContactUs@illinoisfamily.org | www.illinoisfamily.org