

## **Reefer madness will spread – if it works**

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If ever there were two states that were going to be pioneers in legalizing marijuana, they were Colorado and Washington. Smoking pot has been an accepted part of life in both places for decades.

This week, the world's only state-licensed marijuana retailers, legally permitted to sell pot for recreational use, opened their doors in Colorado. By all accounts, business was brisk. The state of Washington expects to follow suit in a few months, as officials there have found the process of building a state-regulated marijuana industry from the ground up a little more complicated.

This was all permitted as a result of referendums that were held in both states in 2012, when residents voted in favour of ending marijuana prohibition and treating the drug much like alcohol. Now, the world is watching to see what unfolds – will it lead to anarchy and depravation? Or will life in both jurisdictions continue on pretty much as normal, while state coffers get infused with a fresh source of revenue?

Colorado is expecting to gross \$578-million annually from marijuana sales. Washington calculates it will bring in about \$2-billion in the first five years. That is nothing to sneeze at. And you can bet that legislators around the United States are eyeing the grand experiment and imagining what they would do with all that cash.

If other states do eventually follow suit, they will have the added bonus of being able to copy the hard work put in by government officials in the pioneering states, who have designed state-regulated marijuana industries from scratch. The many questions officials in both jurisdictions had to

wrestle with were complicated, including: How do you determine demand? Price? The share government takes? What rules do you apply to the locations of retail outlets?

In Washington, the process is being overseen by a former insurance-company pension administrator named Randy Simmons. Mr. Simmons, 60, the state's marijuana project director, is the first to admit that when he was handed the job, his knowledge of marijuana was limited to the odd joint he smoked as a young man. He certainly knew nothing about marijuana derivatives or the growing process or how powerful pot had become over the years.

Suddenly, Mr. Simmons and his team had to consider these issues and more as they built Washington's pot infrastructure. It's been a fascinating journey.

It seems inevitable that unless this trial crashes in spectacular fashion, other states will join the Green Rush. Support seems to be growing across America. According to The New Yorker magazine, a 1991 survey found just 17 per cent of those polled supporting marijuana legalization. But in October, for the first time, a Gallup poll found a majority of Americans – 58 per cent – saying it's time to legalize pot.

Skeptics remain, however. And the success of the legalization initiatives will depend, in large measure, on governments' ability to manage the process. If there is any evidence, for instance that more marijuana is getting into the hands of under aged youths it would be a big issue for the federal government, which is keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings.

If pot from either state starts flooding other jurisdictions, that could also be problematic, as would any evidence that criminal cartels are profiting from legalization. In Washington, smoking pot in public remains illegal, like alcohol consumption. That may be difficult to enforce after people have been allowed to do it for decades.

No doubt, there will be problems as a result of deficiencies in the two systems. After all, much of this is trial and error. The question will be whether any of these flaws are found to be serious enough to undermine or scupper the entire enterprise.

My guess is that once the two state governments get used to all the marijuana tax dollars, they'll do everything in their power to make this work. And if the sky doesn't fall, just watch the other states follow suit.

*Will Canada be quick to follow...?*