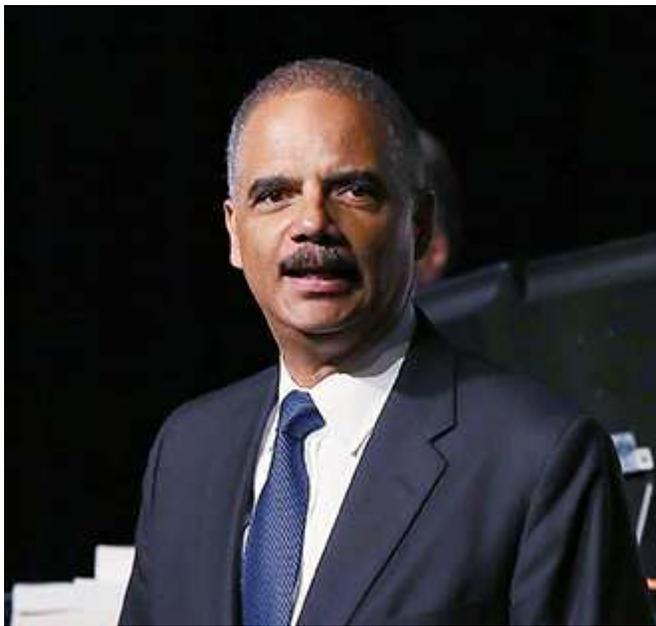


# Federal government won't challenge marijuana legalization laws

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The Department of Justice will not challenge state laws that allow the medical and recreational use of marijuana, and will instead focus on keeping the drug out of the hands of minors and preventing its spread to states where it remains illegal.

Attorney General Eric Holder announced the landmark decision on Thursday when he spoke with the governors of Washington state and Colorado, where recreational pot use was legalized last November.



In a memo sent to federal prosecutors, Deputy Attorney General James Cole said that *"the federal government has traditionally relied on states and local law enforcement agencies to address marijuana activity"* under their own laws. Moving forward, feds will instead shift their focus on enforcing and prosecuting violations of eight priority areas, which include the prevention of marijuana distribution to minors, transportation across state lines where it is illegal as well and the prosecution of criminal organizations that do not have a permit to sell pot.

*"This reflects a balanced approach by the federal government that respects the states' interests in implementing these laws and recognizes the federal government's role in fighting illegal drugs and criminal activity,"* Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and Attorney General Bob Ferguson said in a joint statement.

The new guidelines are a significant rewrite from the Justice Department's previous treatment of marijuana users or businesses, since prosecutors will no longer go after individuals who legally use or sell the drug.

*"It's a major and historic step toward ending marijuana prohibition,"* Colorado marijuana advocate Mason Tvert told the Denver Post. *"It sends a clear signal that states are free to determine their own policies when it comes to marijuana."*

But the guidelines did not alter federal laws. The Justice Department still considers cannabis a Schedule I controlled substance, a category that also includes heroin, methamphetamines and ecstasy.

*"This is not the end of a story,"* Kevin Sabet, a former official with the Office of National Drug Control Policy, told the Post. *"This is the beginning."*

Sabet said that the guidance is not a federal endorsement of marijuana, but more of a prioritization of drug laws.

*"This is not a free pass for states,"* he added. *"I think they're going to have to be very careful in setting up their regimes."*

The Drug Enforcement Administration has **recently** also taken steps to prevent legal cannabis dispensaries from servicing their customers, which contradicts the initiatives of the Justice Department. Earlier this month, the DEA ordered all security and armored vehicle companies to stop servicing legal cannabis dispensaries. Since the federal government previously pressured banks and credit card companies to stop working with pot dispensaries, the providers have heavily relied on armored vehicles to transport large quantities of cash.

The DEA's announcement came less than two week after Holder said he wanted to **reform** US drug laws to keep non-violent drug offenders out of the overcrowded prison system. But with different federal agencies taking different approaches to marijuana laws in states where the drug's use has been legalized, pot smokers and providers might still have to exercise caution when dealing with cannabis.