

Uruguay's lower house approves legal regulated marijuana

August 1 2013, by Giovanna Fleitas

Uruguay's lower house Wednesday approved a controversial bill which for the first time would put a government in charge of production and distribution of legal marijuana.

The bill, unveiled in June 2012 as part of a series of measures to combat rising violence, now heads to the Senate for consideration.

Lawmakers argued for 14 hours before approving the text with 50 votes in favour out of 96.

"The regulation is not meant to promote consumption," lawmaker Sebastian Sabini, who helped draft the legislation, said at the beginning of the session.

"Consumption already exists," he argued.

NGO workers favoring regulation of legal marijuana had filed into the chamber's visitors' galleries as [lawmakers](#) emphasized that the drug business finances organized crime.

The bills backers also argued that marijuana use had doubled in the last ten years in the small, mostly rural South American country of 3.4 million.

President Jose Mujica's leftist government has backed the bill. He himself is a doctor by training.

The long debate was expected in the lower house, where the president's left-leaning Frente Amplio (FA) party has a narrow majority. All the opposition parties oppose the proposed law.

The measure specifies that the government would assume control and regulation of the importation, planting, cultivation, harvesting, production, acquisition, storage, marketing and distribution of marijuana and its derivatives.

After registering, users would be able to cultivate up to six plants, gain access to the drug as part of a marijuana-growing club; or purchase up to 40 grams per month at a dispensary.

Gerardo Amarilla of the opposition National Party, listing marijuana's effects on health, said the project was "playing with fire".

According to a survey released this week, fully 63 percent of people in Uruguay are against the government's plan.

Under the current law, possession of marijuana for personal use is permitted in Uruguay. Judges however can determine what quantity is considered appropriate for personal use.

Many Uruguayans are concerned the law will make foreign tourists think the country is a great place to unwind with marijuana or something stronger.

Uruguay's National Drug Board (JND) has said that the country is home to approximately 20,000 daily marijuana users and some 120,000 total consumers.

The JND estimated that the country sells approximately 22 tons of marijuana, generating between \$30 and \$40 million per year.

The legislative debate comes one year after the measure was floated by the government and in recent months has given rise to public debate and a media campaign.

"It's a change we've been waiting for, and it fixes the hypocrisy in the previous law," Juan Vaz, a spokesman for the Association of Cannabis Studies told AFP.

He that the official figures on consumption were not correct, estimating instead that the number of regular users was closer to 200,000.

The fact that [marijuana](#) would be sold in pharmacies has given rise to resistance from the profession.

"We disagree with the sale of an abusable drug in a pharmacy, which is considered a health center," Virginia Olmos, president of the Association of Chemists and Pharmacists of Uruguay told AFP.

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