

Uruguay to approve pot dealing, despite risks

December 9 2013, by Leonardo Haberkorn



Marcelo Vazquez, a marijuana grower, checks the leaves of his marijuana plants for fungus, on the outskirts of Montevideo, Uruguay, Monday, Dec. 9, 2013. The Uruguayan Senate is expected to approve a law to legalize the production, distribution and sale of marijuana Tuesday. If approved, Uruguay would be the first country to regulate the marijuana market from production to retail. (AP Photo/Matilde Campodonico)

Uruguay is pushing ahead to create a legal marijuana market despite warnings from educators, psychiatrists and pharmacists of dangerous side effects.

The Senate planned to debate the pot plan Tuesday, with approval by the ruling coalition widely expected before the night is over. Because senators turned away all requests for amendments after it passed the lower chamber, their vote will be final.

President Jose Mujica says the point is not to promote marijuana use, but to push out organized crime. The government hopes that when licensed growers, providers and users can openly trade in the drug, illegal traffickers will be denied their profits and go away.

"This is a plague, just like cigarettes are a plague," Mujica told reporters several days earlier.

The Senate Health Commission was given ample arguments to back away from the plan, which would make Uruguay the world's only country where the government is at the center of a legal marijuana market.

Psychiatrists predicted a rise in mental illness. Pharmacists said selling pot alongside prescription drugs would harm their professional image.

Marijuana's negative impact on learning is well known, and "is related to educational failure, behavioral problems and depressive symptoms," testified teacher Nestor Pereira, representing the National Public Education Administration.



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But senate commissions sent the proposal for a floor vote without changes, hoping to avoid a return trip to the lower chamber, where it passed by a single vote.

Socialist Deputy Julio Bango, who co-authored the proposal, told The Associated Press that "this is not a law to liberalize marijuana consumption, but rather to regulate it. Today there is a market dominated by drug traffickers. We want the state to dominate it."

The project includes a media campaign, launched Friday, aimed at

reducing pot smoking by warning of its dangers to human health.

And Uruguay's drug czar, Julio Calzada, told the AP that no pharmacist or other business will be forced to sell the drug.

Calzada said his office will have 120 days to craft regulations following the vote, and is working at full speed. Mujica pledged that his government will work through the traditional southern summer holidays to make the rules as precise as possible.

"There will be much to discuss and to work on. We'll spend the summer working. There's nothing magic about this," said Mujica.

As for concerns that Uruguay could become a mecca for marijuana tourism, Mujica stressed that the pot will legally be sold only to licensed and registered Uruguayan adults.

Meanwhile, marijuana grower Marcelo Vazquez told the AP he can't wait to pay taxes on the weed he's grown illegally for 20 years. After repeated police raids and arrests, he's optimistic. He has a greenhouse of marijuana plants growing outside Montevideo and is thinking about creating a business catering to licensed growers who lack space in their own homes.

"This is a huge opportunity and we have to take advantage of it," Vazquez said. "My lifelong dream has been to legally cultivate [marijuana](#), and to live off this, to pay my taxes. We can't miss this opportunity by debating."

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