

Uruguay limits legal pot purchases to 10 grams per week

May 3 2014, by Ana Inés Cibils

Uruguay on Friday took a major step in setting rules for the government-regulated sale of marijuana, a daring experiment supported by the country's iconoclastic president.

Officials said that customers can buy up to 10 grams of [marijuana](#) a week at a price of 20 to 22 pesos (about \$0.90) per gram.

The small South American country in December became the first in the world to announce that it would regulate the market for cannabis and its derivatives, a bold move by authorities frustrated with losing resources to fighting [drug trafficking](#).

The new rules state that the officially-sanctioned marijuana will have a 15 percent concentration of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)—the plant's main psychoactive ingredient—and come in five varieties.

Buyers must be 18 or older, residents of Uruguay, and must register with authorities.

The decree regulating pot sales is due to be signed by ministers Monday and published Tuesday, said National Drug Board president Diego Canepa.

The new rules are supported by President Jose Mujica, a former guerrilla and medical doctor who leaves office this year.

Pot by December

Once the degree is signed, the government will issue a call for applicants for a limited number of marijuana production licenses.

Canepa estimated that legal marijuana will be available in pharmacies in December.

The official price is based on production costs and profits for the producers and pharmacies, Canepa said.

The total volume consumed in Uruguay—a country of 3.3 million people—"falls around 18 to 22 tons" of cannabis per year, said National Drug Board secretary general Julio Calzada.

"Based on this, we need a maximum of 10 hectares (25 acres)" of crops to meet demand, he added.

Although it has not been illegal to consume marijuana in Uruguay since the 1970s, the sale and distribution of cannabis had been forbidden.

"It was a relief when the law was approved, because I would no longer have to go to a 'boca'" said Claudia, 36, a mother of three children, who used the slang word for an illegal sales point.

The government's registration requirement however may scare away some potential legal buyers.

"There are some people who are afraid of registering because of their work. And if an anti-marijuana government comes to power, the database could be used against them," said Juan Pablo Tubino, owner of a Montevideo store that specializes in cannabis.

The black market for marijuana—where minors, foreigners and registration refusniks can get their weed—will likely remain.

However the new law could "modify" that market, said commissioner Cesar Manuel Sosa, who leads the Directorate for Combating Drug Trafficking.

A controversial experiment

People who grow pot for their individual use or for "clubs" say they are already seeing an increase in theft of their hot commodity.

"Now we see more cultivators, we know that there are a lot of people who plant, and that's why there is theft. Me, I've been robbed, my friends and their acquaintances as well. And that's happening all over the country," said Juan Andres Palese, producer and co-owner of another cannabis shop.

Heavily criticized by the United Nations' International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), Uruguay's marijuana experiment is being closely followed by countries eager to find an alternative to the expensive and violent "war on drugs" spearheaded by the United States.

Hannah Hetzer from the US organization Drug Policy Alliance said there is global interest in studying what aspects of Uruguay's pot-controlling experience can be applied to other countries.

"There is a consensus in several countries that what we are doing in the war on drugs is not working, but not on what the correct answer would be," said Hetzer.

"There are always risks in any reform of drug policies," she said.

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