

Jamaica official says marijuana reform bill ready

January 21 2015, byDavid Mcfadden



In this Aug. 29, 2013, file photo, farmer Breezy shows off the distinctive leaves of a marijuana plant during a tour of his plantation in Jamaica's central mountain town of Nine Mile. Justice Minister Mark Golding said Wednesday, Jan. 21, 2015, that Jamaica's Cabinet has approved a much-anticipated bill of drug law amendments that would decriminalize possession of small amounts of pot and pave the way for a legal medical marijuana industry on the Caribbean island. (AP Photo/David McFadden, File)

Jamaica's Cabinet has approved a much-anticipated bill of drug law

amendments that would decriminalize possession of small amounts of pot and pave the way for a legal medical marijuana industry on the Caribbean island, the justice minister said Wednesday.

Following the Cabinet's authorization, Justice Minister Mark Golding said he expects to introduce the legislation in the Senate by the end of this week. Debate could start before the end of the month in the pot-steeped country where the drug, known popularly as "ganja," has long been culturally entrenched but illegal.

Golding said the bill would establish a "cannabis licensing authority" to deal with the various regulations needed to cultivate, sell and distribute marijuana for medical, scientific and therapeutic purposes.

"We need to position ourselves to take advantage of the significant economic opportunities offered by this emerging industry," Golding said.

It would make possession of 2 ounces or less a ticketable offense that would not result in a criminal record. Cultivation of five or fewer plants on any premises would be permitted. Rastafarians who use [marijuana](#) as a sacrament could also legally use cannabis for religious purposes for the first time in Jamaica, where the spiritual movement was founded in the 1930s.

For decades, debate has raged in Jamaica over relaxing laws prohibiting ganja. But now, with a number of countries and U.S. states relaxing their [marijuana laws](#) the Jamaican government is advancing reform plans.

Golding stressed that the government will not soften its stance on transnational drug trafficking and it intends to use a portion of revenues from its new licensing authority to support a public education campaign to discourage pot smoking by youngsters and mitigate public health

consequences.

The head of Jamaica's Cannabis Commercial and Medicinal Research Taskforce said he expected the bill to be passed soon in Parliament, where Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller's governing party holds a 2-to1 majority.

"The development is long overdue," task force director Delano Seiveright said.

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