

Marijuana legalisation debate fires up in France

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French politicians across the board on Tuesday slammed a Socialist minister's call to legalise marijuana, re-igniting the debate in a country where cannabis use is common.

A day after minister for parliamentary relations Jean-Marie Le Guen said prohibition had not caused drug use to fall, his own party called decriminalisation a bad idea.

Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem said a softer approach to marijuana would show "we have let our guard down in the fight against drugs."

Former right-wing prime minister Francois Fillon added his voice, saying "legalisation of cannabis would be an extremely permissive signal to send to [young people](#)."

Government spokesman Stephane Le Foll said there was no "no work, nor consideration" of a possible legalisation of cannabis.

Le Guen, who is also a doctor and public health expert, stressed Monday that "cannabis is a very bad thing for public health, in particular for young people."

But he said: "prohibition has not led to a decrease in consumption."

He called for "a selective lifting of prohibition for adults, although

certainly not for young people below 21 years of age."

Top teen smokers

France's response to marijuana use differs markedly from the Dutch approach of tolerance and the legal recreational use in Uruguay, four American states and the US capital Washington DC.

Another 19 states have legalized marijuana for medical use, but it is still illegal under federal law.

Spanish law allows for the private production and consumption of cannabis by adults, though its sale is still illegal.

Cannabis use has been illegal in France since 1970, punishable by one year in prison and a 3,750-euro (\$4,200) fine. In practice, imprisonment is rare, although fines continue to be meted out.

Despite being totally illegal, some 17 million of France's 66 million-strong population said they had tried cannabis.

About 700,000 said they use it daily, according to France's National Observatory of Drugs and Drug Abuse.

Some experts say France needs to do some soul searching on its drug laws.

"We have to rethink health policy on cannabis. We're following a path of repression in regards to addiction," Laurent Karila, a psychiatrist and addiction expert said Tuesday.

"Young French people are the top European consumers of cannabis. It is clear that it is not working," he added.

A bill proposing the state-controlled sale and use of cannabis was shot down last April after failing to make much progress in the French parliament.

At the same time, France has the highest percentage of 15-year-old pot smokers among 42 well-off nations surveyed by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Fifteen percent of 15-year-olds in France—slightly more boys than girls—said they had indulged, with Canada's young stoners close behind.

Amsterdam flaunts its cannabis cafes and Barcelona its private reefer clubs, but neither the Netherlands nor Spain were among the top eight nations in which teens admitted they had used [cannabis](#) in the last 30 days, according to the WHO study, based on data from 2014.

Legalised pot spots

The debate over legalising marijuana fired back up in France on Tuesday after a minister said cannabis should be decriminalised.

Here are places where marijuana is already allowed for recreational or medical reasons.

Uruguay

The South American nation became in 2013 the first country in the world to legalise marijuana, with a plan to distribute it through pharmacies for \$1.40 (1.20 euros) a gram.

Under Uruguayan law, citizens and residents can buy up to 40 grams (1.4 ounces) of pot a month from the pharmacies, grow it themselves at

home, or join cannabis clubs where members jointly tend to the plants.

The government has licensed two private companies to produce and distribute marijuana.

The Netherlands

Long the historic destination for those looking to score some weed, the Netherlands in general, and Amsterdam in particular have tolerated the sale and use of marijuana in iconic coffee shops since 1976.

Cultivation and bulk sale of the drug remain illegal however, and are still controlled by criminal organisations.

Spain

Spanish law allows for the private production and consumption of cannabis by adults, though its sale is still illegal.

United States

Four western US states—Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, Washington—along with the nation's capital Washington D.C. have legalised marijuana for recreational use.

Colorado and Washington led the way in 2012, but cannabis is still illegal under federal law. Another 19 states have legalised marijuana for medical use.

In 2015, Colorado earned \$135 million in taxes and licensing fees on nearly \$1 billion in pot sales, according to The Denver Post.

The state of Washington took in \$70 million on statewide pot revenue totalling \$257 million, a number that fell below expectations owing to a supply shortage.

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