

Pot business is smoking hot in US, despite Trump

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Walk into Brett Vapnik's medicinal marijuana dispensary in Los Angeles and the pungent aroma of pot is good and strong.

All day long, hundreds of people file in and out—a sign of the strength of the pot industry, despite big question marks posed by the new administration of President Donald Trump.

For now Vapnik, who also has a small pot garden in his store, just sells marijuana for medicinal purposes: from the plant itself, with varying degrees of potency, to beauty products and even chocolate and cookies, all laced with herb.

But next year he expects sales to triple, as the most populous US state is slated to legalize sales and consumption of marijuana for recreational purposes.

Almost 60 percent of the US population lives in [states](#) where the sale and use of marijuana is legal to one extent or another: 29 states and the capital Washington, DC have laws governing its medicinal use.

And of these, eight and Washington, DC allow its use for people simply to get high, for fun.

But the federal government still classifies marijuana as an [illegal drug](#).

"According to them, yes, I'm a drug dealer," Vapnik told AFP. He said

that now that the conservative Trump is in power, there is a lot of uncertainty in the industry, which had a reported \$6.9 billion in revenue in 2016.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer set off alarms recently when he said of federal law on marijuana, "I do believe you will see greater enforcement of it."

But what did he mean, exactly? That there will be raids in states where sales are legalized?

It is hard to tell, said Vapnik, 44 and co-owner of a dispensary since 2010.

He said he does not think the DEA drug agency will intervene because Congress has barred any federal action in states where marijuana for medicinal purposes is legal—an order that can be extended to pot for recreational use.

So maybe way the to crack down will be taxes, said Vapnik.

Now, the tax on revenue at shops like his varies from 40 percent to 70 percent.

"Technically, the federal government is our biggest partner in what they consider an illegal drug operation," said Vapnik. He said he does not see pot being legalized at the federal level with Trump in power.

So for the time being, customers keep coming into his shop and leaving with their pot in small white paper bags. His revenue is about \$4 million a year.

VIP Marijuana

During the election campaign Trump said he supported medicinal use of marijuana and respected state laws allowing this. But for advocacy groups the bigger source of worry are people in the Trump administration like Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a conservative southerner who opposes legal pot.

"While the short term prognosis is uncertain, the long term prognosis has never been better," said Troy Dayton, head of the marketing research firm Arcview.

It was Arcview that calculated the pot industry was worth \$6.9 billion in 2016. By 2021 it sees the industry moving \$21 billion a year.

"I think by 2021 it is reasonable that Congress will end federal prohibition," said Dayton.

"The sky hasn't fallen" in Colorado, Oregon, Washington, the states where marijuana use for recreational purposes was first legalized, Dayton told AFP.

He said polls show that 60 percent of Americans favor pot being legalized.

He said it will not be tenable for Republicans or Democrats to keep supporting a ban on something that Dayton said is safer than alcohol.

In November of last year, voters approved possession and consumption of marijuana in California. Rules on sales, also approved then, will be issued in 2018 when the process opens for the granting of licenses for sales of recreational pot.

In the meantime, in the mist of the legal limbo, a VIP pot smokers club opened recently.

For a monthly fee ranging from \$300 to \$1,000, members can attend members-only parties starring marijuana and take home high quality pot-based products.

The founder of one of them, Sailene Ossman, said hers does not sell pot. Rather, she said, membership gives people the privilege of receiving gifts of [marijuana](#).

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