TuSalud

Uruguay Reduces Drug War to Increase Public Health

The South American nation legalizes marijuana.

April 17, 2014 By Casey Halter

On December 10, 2013, Uruguay shocked the international community by becoming the first country in the world to legalize marijuana in its entirety. Now that the government has debated regulations and drawn them up, anyone in the small South American country will be able to grow, sell and smoke the plant, starting as early as this April.

The controversial decision, heralded by the nation's 78-year-old guerilla-turned-President Jose Mujica, will essentially turn the country into a social experiment to either fodder or discredit the growing argument for drug legalization around the world.

Mujica's government says it's going pro-pot in an attempt to wrangle the weed business away from criminals and cartels. They argue that legalization will allow authorities to fight drug crimes and health issues more effectively in the country. But the decision, which barely passed in the Uruguayan parliament and is opposed by nearly two-thirds of the nation's voters, has a lot to prove over the next few years.

Will Uruguay's new law be a unique opportunity to finally prove an alternative to the failed "war on drugs" and to show a real medical benefit to marijuana in mainstream society? Or will it create addicts, spin Uruguay's illicit drug use out of control and put the nail in the coffin for international cannabis legalization?

Only Time Will Tell

Before going into the potential effects of weed legalization in Uruguay, it's important to note that by no means is there going to be a marijuana free-for-all in the country. The nation has set up a very strict regulatory system under its new National Cannabis Federation, which will have to approve nearly every facet of the marijuana industry.

Hannah Hetzer, a spokesperson from The Americas at the Drug Policy Alliance, has already called Uruguay's weed legalization policies "the most advanced in the world." Here's why:

Although official rules have not yet been published, we know so far that the law only applies to Uruguayan residents (sorry weed tourists!) older than 18 who will have to register for a license on a strict government database. Licensees will be able to buy a maximum of 40 grams (1.4 ounces) of marijuana every 30 days, from green-lighted government pharmacies.

Uruguayan residents will also have the option to grow up to six registered marijuana plants a year in their homes for their own supply, or they can form smoking clubs between 15 and 45 members that will be able to grow up to 99 plants a year. Registered smokers will be able to light up anywhere tobacco is legal; however, they will not be able to advertise their pot products.

If users try to request more than the modest amount allowed by the government, which makes up about 40 joints a month with either method, they will be referred to substance abuse treatment facilities for marijuana addiction.

What's more, Uruguay has now begun cultivating a specific government strain of cannabis that has regulated amounts of THC (the active ingredient and psychoactive part of the plant) and specific genetic markers embedded within its DNA. All plants will also be given radio-frequency tags that will track their location. The combination of safety mechanisms will allow Uruguayan police to test the pot of any user to ensure that state-grown weed remains in the country, is strictly monitored and isn't mixed up with illegally grown crops.

Licensed marijuana growers will have to go through government training courses on how to cultivate the plant correctly, and they will only be able to use pre-approved seeds. The National Cannabis Federation, which will approve all of the plants before they go on sale to the registered public, is currently in the process of establishing research and production policies for scientists looking to study the effects of the drug.

Battling the "War on Drugs"

When Mujica initially announced the marijuana legalization plans in 2012, he stressed that the proposal would offer a potential alternative to the U.S.-led war on drugs.

For years, the Reagan-era anti-narcotics policy, which focuses on tough police tactics and strict criminalization, has been under fire from international activists who say giving drugs sales to the black market actually seems to put more money and power into the hands of violent criminals. What's more, statistics show that drug-related violence and profits for illegal cartels have actually increased since the war on drugs policy was implemented.

"We've given this market as a gift to the drug traffickers, and that is more destructive socially than the drug itself," said Mujica in an interview with Argentine news agency Telam shortly after his 2012 announcement.

And looking at the demographics, it seems Uruguay might just be the perfect place for this type of

liberal experiment. The tiny nation is one of the safest and most stable countries in South America, and it has avoided most of the major drug conflicts that have plagued neighbors such as Brazil and Paraguay over recent decades. In addition, about 85 percent of illegal drug users in Uruguay report using only marijuana, meaning that the weed legalization policy has the potential to take a huge chunk out of the illegal drug trade.

The weed problem in Uruguay is relatively small even though it has been legal to possess and use small amounts of pot since 1974. Out of about 3.3 million residents, only about 10 percent of the country's population, or around 115,000 users say they have smoked marijuana. On average, drug-related violence in Uruguay is growing, but it's mostly due to an influx of "pasta-base," a crack-like, paste-y byproduct of cocaine production that has gained popularity since cartels started shuttling it into the country in 2001.

Uruguay already has a pretty good track record of drug seizures, too, with police busting nearly 10 percent of traffickers (compared with the worldwide average of less than 5 percent). Mujica's government thinks that marijuana legalization will boost these numbers by allowing police to focus on drug traders as opposed to users, and that it will also help authorities hone in on more dangerous drugs.

The government is also going to try to wrest the trade away from illegal suppliers by competitively pricing their pot with black market counterparts.

"If one gram costs $1 in the black market, then we'll sell the legal product for $1. If they drop the price to 75 cents, then we'll put it at that level," Julio Calzada, head of Uruguay's National Sectariat on Drugs and one of Mujica's top advisors, said in an official statement about the new law.

The cheaper government weed will be better quality than what's on the black market, too. Illegal cannabis in Uruguay often contains leaves and stems, which do not contain pot's healing properties, and in many cases it's tarnished with toxic additives like ammonia to help keep plants from drying out during transport. But Uruguay's tough regulation standards and homegrown methods will make for a safer, more enjoyable product.

So, how will Uruguay prove its point? The FIU Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) and the Universidad Catolica del Uruguay have already announced that they will be partnering to conduct a comprehensive research project on the effects of pot legalization and drug policy in Uruguay.

For the study, local scientists will assess the law's effects on social attitudes and norms for marijuana use. Researchers will also pinpoint the characteristics of typical drug users and analyze how their actions change once pot is legalized.

International agencies will also be tracking rates of drug violence, drug use and cartel control in Uruguay after the law is fully implemented later this year. But only time will tell if Mujica's pro-cannabis conjectures will ring true.

Weed as Medicine

Another aspect to consider: The Uruguayan government will expand medical research on the plant's potential. Part of Uruguay's legalization law will incorporate cannabis into the public health system along with acupuncture and homeopathy to check out its effects. It will also set up a huge scientific infrastructure to look in-depth into how and why weed works.

Consider the conundrum: Cannabis contains nearly 500 organic compounds, and 80 are currently being used for scientific/medical purposes. Preliminary research shows the drug can do everything from relieving pain, treating insomnia and easing anxiety symptoms to stopping seizures and preventing the growth and spread of cancer cells. However, strict anti-drug laws in most countries have severely limited scientists' ability to test their hypotheses in a medically meaningful way. Basically, Uruguay could be the golden ticket to proving that weed really does treat variety of health conditions.

At the forefront of this medical marijuana push will be Uruguay's University of the Republic, which will hone in on testing three uses for the drug: its treatment of degenerative neurological diseases (like Alzheimer's and dementia), palliative care (for cancer, diabetes, glaucoma and multiple sclerosis, for example) and pain management (for diseases like fibromyalgia, Crohn's disease and chronic injuries).

For the studies, Uruguayan researchers will study the biological, chemical and medical aspects of how certain compounds can treat specific ailments. Without the fear of legal ramifications, scientists will be able to develop creams, oils, sweets, capsules and other products to figure out the best ways to treat a multitude of ailments. In one study, researchers will take a look at how marijuana affects sleep patterns and insomnia. Uruguay is even considering allowing prisoners to smoke weed if it will benefit their health, and it will specifically look at how pot can help inmate addicts recover from their pasta-base addictions.

Geneticists will also try to identify different strains of the plant, figure out the differences in their ingredients, explore how they work to treat different ailments and plan to create a national cannabis database with their findings.

Because of the huge opportunities for marijuana research, other countries are now asking to set up labs in Uruguay, although the government says it is still ironing out the details. Canada, Chile and Israel have also expressed interest in importing Uruguayan-grown weed for medical purposes.

"Uruguay will become a hub for biotechnology," Uruguayan presidential spokesman Diego Canepa told local newspaper El Observador in January. It's easy to see how the in-depth research and high-yield medical-grade weed could finally bring cannabis research, production and treatment up to date with the rest of the medical community. Or, if tests go badly, it could bring the whole cannabis craze to a screeching halt.

What to Watch

The first government-grown crops won't even be available until the end of 2014, so the verdict won't arrive anytime soon. Until then, Uruguay must consider a multitude of issues: How will it keep pot fields free of poachers? What will the demand be, and how will it be met? The processes of packaging the drug, taxing it, distributing it and selling it as part of a national strategy are all still in their infant stages, and will be ironed out as issues arise.

Also, a lot of the international community is upset with Uruguay for moving forward with its legalization law. Mujica didn't check with the United Nations first to see if his national strategy was OK before implementing it, and the UN's International Narcotics Board has already condemned the move as a violation of international drug treaties.

Back home, nearly 58 percent of Uruguayans actually oppose the law. Some people fear it will encourage drug use or promote an influx of unwanted tourists, while other citizens simply don't want their weed regulated and genetically modified by the national government. In 2014, Uruguay will hold elections that will define Mujica's successor, and if the law doesn't work out, legal weed could be axed all together.

However, Uruguay also received an influx of praise for its radical decision. This year, Mujica was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2013 the Economist called Uruguay "Country of the Year" for its new drug legalization and gay marriage policies. Argentina says it will be following the news in Uruguay to see if it should implement its own total-legalization policy, and Mexico, Chile, Ecuador and Peru say they are now considering cannabis reform.

For the 162 million marijuana users around the world, who comprise nearly 4 percent of the word's adult population, Uruguay has become a case study for pot legalization. Depending on the results, South America could plant the seeds for a golden age of cannabis.

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