

Lawmakers, US drug enforcers clash over marijuana rules

4 March 2014, by Michael Mathes

US lawmakers supportive of steadily relaxing state marijuana laws sparred Tuesday with Obama administration officials who continue to label pot in the same high-danger category as killer drugs like cocaine and heroin.

The Drug Enforcement Administration's chief deputy said marijuana deserved to remain listed as a "Schedule 1" narcotic like LSD even though he could not identify a single fatal overdose attributable to cannabis last year.

"Marijuana is the most widely available and commonly abused illicit drug in the United States," the DEA's Thomas Harrigan told a House panel in a joint statement with John Walsh, the US attorney in Colorado, a state that legalized recreational marijuana use in January.

Abuse among young Americans is on the rise, and marijuana's more potent production methods are an increasing concern to [law enforcement](#) and health officials, they said.

The comments drew blistering responses from lawmakers confounded at the Washington's multi-billion-dollar anti-drug strategy that leads to thousands of incarcerations for acts that already have been decriminalized in some 20 states.

"We've locked people up. We're spending billions of dollars, and it's not working," House Democrat Earl Blumenauer said.

Some 750,000 Americans were arrested on marijuana charges in 2011, outpacing arrests for violent crime, Blumenauer said citing FBI figures.

He and fellow member Steve Cohen noted how 16,000 people died last year from prescription drug overdoses, and how thousands more died from cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines and the legal intoxicant alcohol.

When asked how many people died from marijuana, Harrigan told the House government oversight panel: "I'm not aware of any."

The hearing was held just as Washington's city council ruled to decriminalize marijuana, making possession of small amounts of the drug as serious as getting a parking ticket in the nation's capital.

Several lawmakers have argued that bringing marijuana sales within the US legal framework would allow authorities to tax and closely monitor the drug.

But Harrigan insisted that "there are no sound scientific, economic or social reasons to change our nation's marijuana policy."

Cohen said the law was so universally decried as wrong that "it breeds disrespect for the law and for the entire judiciary system."

Subcommittee chairman John Mica noted that distinct conflicts between the federal law and state initiatives like those in Colorado needed to be resolved.

"We are trying to sort this out," Mica said.

Republican Thomas Massie took aim at the government's restrictions on cultivation of hemp, a cannabis plant with negligible quantities of psychoactive THC.

Harrigan said that policy was under review.

Democrat Gerry Connolly warned that US marijuana policy had racial overtones, citing figures showing blacks were four times more likely than whites to be arrested on [marijuana](#) charges.

"This level of disparity is indefensible," he said.

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