

Everything you wanted to know about legalizing marijuana (but weren't sure you could ask)

Suzanna Caldwell, Alaska Dispatch News September 13, 2014

In November, Alaskans will decide whether the state will become the third in the nation to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. It's controversial in that the drug is still illegal at the federal level, but also because it will essentially create a new industry – or at least a newly legitimate industry – in the state.

Consideration of legalization puts Alaska at the forefront of the movement to allow recreational marijuana sales, following Washington and Colorado. Oregon voters also will consider a similar measure and are set to vote on the same day Alaskans will.

Alaska is known for its live-and-let-live mentality and libertarian attitudes. So far, Alaska is the only state to endorse the private use of marijuana in the home, adding shades of gray to a legal area that is already far from black and white. Put those together, and it makes sense that Alaska would be one of the first states to look at whether or not the drug should be legalized.

However, the road to legalization is a complicated one. Those in favor of the initiative are quick to say that marijuana prohibition has failed and that it's time for the state to take back the black market and stop unnecessarily criminalizing people. Those against it say Alaska's drug policy is working and that legalization will only proliferate the drug, cause increased use – especially among youth – and

be a burden on public health.

Questions go beyond whether you're a heavy toker or staunch abstainer. Besides figuring out how to deal with public safety and health are the larger questions about how to create an entire industry from scratch. Much can be learned from what's happening in Washington and Colorado, but there are unique issues only Alaska will face.

Below is a primer on what we know and don't know about the proposed law, drawing on legal history, precedents being set in other states and our own reporting, including a handy timeline that outlines major events in Alaska marijuana history. Expect this to be updated as we continue our reporting on what this measure could mean for Alaskans.

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