

THE NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

U.S. House Votes to Approve Measure Blocking Feds from Interfering with State Cannabis Laws

Tuesday, June 25, 2019

On June 20, 2019, the House of Representatives passed a bipartisan amendment by a 267–165 vote that would protect state-legal cannabis programs from interference by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ).

Sponsored by Representatives Earl Blumenauer (D-OR), Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) and Tom McClintock (R-CA), the rider to the fiscal year 2020 Commerce-Justice-Science spending bill specifically prohibits the DOJ from using funds to prevent states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. territories from implementing their adult-use and medical marijuana programs. Considering that the existing policy enacted in 2014 protects only local medical cannabis, including adult-use programs is a huge expansion.

Before voting, Greenwich Biosciences, the manufacturer of Epidiolex, an FDA-approved CBD medication, unsuccessfully attempted to convince the Congress to vote against it, claiming that the measure is "overly broad and could be interpreted as impacting the ability of the DOJ to assist the FDA with any enforcement action that may need to be taken to ensure the public safety." The majority of the Congress disagreed.

Early on Wednesday, June 19, the House approved a similar amendment protecting the marijuana laws of Indian tribes, as it did an amendment that would protect Veterans Affairs doctors who recommend medical cannabis in states where it is legal. The House also is going to consider another amendment that would allow military veterans to receive medical marijuana recommendations from Department of Veterans Affairs doctors.

"This is the most significant vote in the marijuana reform policy that the House of Representatives has ever taken," said NORML Political Director Justin Strekal. He added that the vote indicates the increasing awareness of political leaders and the growing power of the marijuana reform movement. In fact, since 2015, the number of states with full legalization laws has more than doubled, meaning that far more lawmakers now represent constituents who stand to benefit from its protections.

At this point, it is unclear whether the Republican-controlled Senate will support the amendment, despite the Senate Appropriations Committee's record of consistently approving medical cannabis protections.

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