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## New Mexico cannabis backers tout rising national support

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A new Pew Research Center survey shows two-thirds of Americans now support legalizing marijuana for recreational use, a timely backdrop to an impending legalization push in New Mexico.

Legalizing recreational marijuana is one of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's top priorities for the legislative session starting in January and is a measure supported by other lawmakers.

“The Pew survey is national in scope but captures what we believe is the attitude in New Mexico toward cannabis legalization,” Judy Gibbs Robinson, a spokeswoman for the governor, said in an email. “But support for the issue is only one piece of the equation; we need to ensure New Mexicans’ expectations for legalization, concerning public safety and economic well-being and social justice among other factors, are met.

“We’re optimistic a credible proposal to legalize recreational cannabis will materialize ahead of the session,” Robinson added.

Combined with supporters of legalization for medical use, an overwhelming 91 percent of Americans support legalization in some form, according to Pew’s September survey. The latest results come amid a decadeslong trend of increasing public support for marijuana, which rose from about 12 percent in 1969 to 67 percent in 2019, according to Pew.

New Mexico legalized marijuana for medicinal use in 2007. Recreational backers here say the survey adds credence to lawmakers’ push to greenlight it more broadly in the upcoming, 30-day legislative session.

A policy advisory panel assembled by the governor issued a report in October that recommended expunging marijuana possession convictions and outlined policy advice on labeling, testing, licensing fees, taxes and funding law enforcement with marijuana money, among other issues.

A legal, adult-use market in New Mexico would generate more than 13,000 new jobs, \$850 million in annual sales and \$100 million in annual revenue for state and local governments, according to the report.

The projections are estimates based on an assumption that the recreational market would develop in five years to six times the size of the state’s Medical Cannabis Program — which now serves about 75,000 patients.

The potential financial boon was one of proponents’ key arguments to lawmakers earlier this week during an advisory economic development panel presented with Lujan Grisham’s marijuana panel report recommendations.

Eleven states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for recreational use. Thirty-three states and D.C., Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands also have legalized it for medical use, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

For supporters, the Pew survey is another sign that it's time to legalize recreational marijuana. But not everyone is lauding the legalization push.

State Rep. Martin Zamora, a Clovis Republican who is an advisory member of the interim Economic and Rural Development Committee, said he remains staunchly opposed. Other lawmakers, including state Rep. James Townsend, R-Artesia, also remain against any recreational cannabis proposal.

Townsend, the House Republican leader, said that although national support for legalization has continued to climb, voters in his district remain mostly opposed.

"I think it can have a place in a medicinal role," he said. "But I'm still opposed to it on a recreational level."

Albuquerque attorney and New Mexico Cannabis Law Section chair Carlos Martinez said he's not surprised national polling shows two-thirds of Americans in support of recreational marijuana. But he said he thinks New Mexico still needs more time to bring enough lawmakers on board.

"I don't think we're gonna get it done in a 30-day session. It's a great start for the 2021 session," Martinez said.

Although the public may have "moved way beyond debating" recreational marijuana, "a legislative solution creates a messy and delayed pathway to the inevitability of fulfilling the obviously clear public mandate for legalization today," said Duke Rodriguez, president and CEO of Ultra Health, the largest medical marijuana company in the state.

Rodriguez said it "would already be a reality" in New Mexico if the state allowed public referendums, which is how legalization efforts have happened in most other states that have had them.

State Rep. Moe Maestas, D-Albuquerque, said the public has "been ahead of politicians on this issue for some time" and criticized colleagues who oppose recreational use.

He added New Mexico will "have the best cannabis bill in the country."