

Colorado's neighbors dismayed by new wave of marijuana traffic

By Jenny Deam

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Sheriff John Jenson watched the 2012 election returns crawling across his TV screen in this rural area just over the Colorado border. Tuned to a Denver news station, he soon realized Colorado voters were about to legalize recreational marijuana.

That's when he turned to his wife and started to swear.

"I felt just sick," he remembers. "The drug war in this country used to be along the U.S.-Mexican border. Now it's eight miles away."

Although legalization continues to be celebrated within Colorado, its next-door neighbors are none too pleased. In fact, many are furious.

Law enforcement officers in the smaller, often isolated counties in states ringing Colorado say their departments shudder under the weight of Colorado pot flowing illegally across the border. Drug arrests are rising, straining already strapped budgets in places where marijuana remains illegal.

"It has just devastated these smaller agencies," says Tom Gorman, director of the federally funded Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program, a network of law enforcement organizations in four Western states. "The marijuana laws [in Colorado] were supposed to eliminate the black market. But in effect they have become the black market."

A study by his organization last year found that between 2005 and 2012, the amount of seized Colorado pot heading for other states increased 400%. Although it is legal for adults to possess small amounts of marijuana in Colorado, it remains against the law to take it out of the state.

But most agree it's fantasy to think that won't happen.

Nowhere is that more apparent than along Nebraska's panhandle, a rolling land of cows, corn and wind where entrance to the state is marked only by a welcome sign on a lonely stretch of highway.

"There's about a dozen back roads into my county from Colorado. I've got eight deputies. Even if I had every one of them take a road and sit on it day and night, there are still four roads left," says Jenson, the Cheyenne County sheriff. He is so angry that he has not set foot in Colorado for two years.

Here in the deep red heart of a red state, many view the shift in tolerance toward marijuana with disdain.

"They passed a law and didn't give a second thought to how it would impact surrounding states," Jenson fumes. "If they want Colorado to be the High State and live up to all of those John Denver songs, they can keep it in their four walls. I don't need Colorado's problems in Nebraska."

In Sidney, Police Chief B.J. Wilkinson says he has made 50 marijuana-related arrests this year — a 20% increase over the same time last year. "In a town of 6,900, that's quite a few."

The quiet county seat is perhaps best known locally as headquarters of the Cabela's sporting and hunting goods chain.

"We've always had people who used marijuana, and we pretty much knew who they were. The difference now is availability. We are finding people we never would have suspected have become recreational users. You walk by people on the street and can smell it. You can smell it in the aisles of Wal-Mart," Wilkinson said.

There has also been an uptick in property crime, which Wilkinson thinks is because thefts are financing marijuana buys across the state line.

Jenson says county jail numbers are "through the roof." In 2009, 15 people were jailed for marijuana-related charges. In 2013, there were 62.

Nearby Deuel County, population 2,000, stopped putting prisoners in its antiquated basement jail years ago. Now, it's an evidence room chock-full of confiscated marijuana, nearly all of which comes from cars leaving Colorado. These days, about 1 in 7 traffic stops yields some kind of drug activity, says Deuel County Sheriff Adam Hayward.

"We should sell it back to Colorado," he says with a sigh.

Deuel County authorities made about 35 felony marijuana arrests in 2013. This year, in less than five months, there have been 27, Hayward says. A first-time possession offense of an ounce or less is a civil citation and a \$300 fine, but fees and penalties can rise quickly.

The county's cost for court-appointed lawyers has doubled in the last year, he says. And the number of driving-under-the-influence arrests involving marijuana has overtaken the number of those involving alcohol. With only four officers, Hayward's tiny department often feels under siege.

Last summer, four Minnesota teenagers were caught driving 86 mph through Deuel County. When a deputy pulled over the vehicle, he found about a pound of marijuana that had been purchased in Colorado. In a plea deal, the 16- and 17-year-olds confessed that they had hung around dispensaries and asked people to make buys for them. They spent about \$2,500, which they had hoped to turn into \$6,000 in future sales back home.

"How do you fight that?" Hayward asks.

Colorado pot is now considered the weed of choice for many across the country, trumping the Mexican variety, he says. "Everybody tells us: We want the high-grade stuff coming out of Colorado."

The same story is playing out in other states that border Colorado.

"We're just one dog out here chasing many rabbits," agrees Marc Finley, undersheriff for Thomas County, Kan., not far from the Colorado state line. He too said the number of marijuana-impaired driving arrests had recently overtaken those involving alcohol in his county.

In New Mexico, San Juan County is about 15 miles from the Colorado line. Sheriff Ken Christesen says his deputies were being hit with a double whammy: pot coming north from Mexico and south from Colorado. "I don't think we have a good handle on it yet," he says. "We're just sitting back and watching all the trials and tribulations that Colorado is sorting through."

Not everyone sees the reefer routes as a big deal, however. Back in Sidney, Hailey Miller, a 23-year-old mother of two, wonders whether authorities are overreacting and whether the money spent on pot enforcement could be better spent elsewhere.

"I don't use [it] so it doesn't really affect me, but I don't see anything wrong with it," Miller says. In fact, she says, her cousin recently picked up some edible marijuana in Colorado and brought it home.

Chief Wilkinson has heard those sentiments before. He knows some people think legalization is a train that cannot be stopped and want Nebraska to get aboard. He concedes that stopping personal use is mostly impossible.

"I wish the only thing we had to worry about was marijuana use," he says. "If so, I wouldn't get so puckered up." But he thinks other drugs often follow marijuana use, and he worries that addictions hurt families in his little town. "That right there is a good enough reason to keep up the fight."