

Washington State to Require Approval of Packaging for Edible Marijuana Products

By KIRK JOHNSON

Nytimes.com | JUNE 24, 2014

SEATTLE — Washington State will require its approval of all packaging for edible marijuana products, Gov. Jay Inslee said Tuesday, a pre-emptory move to ban cartoons, toy images and any other labels that might appeal to children.

Mr. Inslee announced the emergency set of rules on how marijuana-infused edible products are marketed and sold in retail shops as part of the state's response to reports of overdoses and under-age consumption in Colorado.

“We know that people will make arguments about the First Amendment at some point,” said Mr. Inslee, a Democrat, referring to the labeling restrictions at a news conference in Olympia, the capital. “But we're here to say the health of our children are predominant, and we're going to take an approach that is focused on the health of our children.”

Officials at the State Liquor Control Board, which regulates legal marijuana, said that the board planned to take up the rules as early as Wednesday, and that they would take effect immediately without public hearings.

The first 20 or so retail outlets — out of 334 that the state plans to gradually license — are expected to open on July 8.

Voters in Colorado and Washington approved legal marijuana at the same time in 2012, but Washington's rollout of the system has taken longer because of the way the license process was set up.

The lag, while frustrating to consumers and license applicants, has given regulators time to see what problems Colorado has encountered. Two particular areas of concern, state officials said, were reports of people eating too much marijuana-infused foods and of products legally purchased by adults over 21 falling into the hands of teenagers and younger children.

A big part of the effort in advance of retail sales, they said Tuesday, is aimed at trying to start conversations about marijuana before the first open-for-business sign is hung.

The Washington State Department of Health, for example, began a \$400,000 advertising campaign this month urging parents to discourage their children from using marijuana.

“The goal is to get parents to talk to their kids now and not wait until retail sales start happening,” an agency spokesman, Donn Moyer, said. He said that after retail sales started,

marijuana products, like bottles of alcohol, were going to be more common in many households, perhaps even in the same liquor cabinet — a shelf that children are already curious about. “It was a conscious decision to try to get ahead of this,” he said.

The question of what is an appropriate serving of marijuana, especially given the huge increase in potency in recent years, has also become a major element of discussion in both Colorado and Washington, and one that state officials here said they were trying to address as well before stores opened.

In March, a 19-year-old African exchange student, Levy Thamba Pongi, plunged to his death in Denver from a hotel balcony after eating multiple servings of a marijuana-laced cookie, in what has become a focal point and symbol of those worries.

A new state brochure, shown at Tuesday’s news conference and intended for distribution in the first retail shops next month, is aimed at discussing that idea, and communicating ideas of portion control especially to older adults who might have tried marijuana decades ago, but not since. The brochure urges people who try edible products to wait patiently for results before eating any more, and to be cautious and careful.

“The marijuana today is not the marijuana of the ’60s,” said Sharon Foster, the chairwoman of the Liquor Control Board.

What happens in Washington and Colorado, both the bumps and the efforts to smooth them, is also being closely watched in states where voters are considering legalization. Legalization for recreational use is on the ballot in November in Alaska, and petition sponsors in Oregon said they planned to deliver enough signatures, perhaps as early as this week, to put it on the ballot there as well.