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Colorado politicians ignore major pot problems

Gov. John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., and Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., don't seem to care much about the toll recreational marijuana imposes on Colorado. Each reacted with righteous indignation to the Trump administration's decision to rescind the Obama administration's lax pot policies. "It's not a black market anymore. It's not a criminal activity, and we would hate for the state to go backwards," Hickenlooper said Thursday, expressing concern about the potential for more federal enforcement against our state's illegal marijuana industry.

Gardner asserted his duty Thursday to protect the state's "right" to sanction, host, and profit from an industry that flagrantly violates federal law to the detriment of traffic safety, federal lands, children, and neighboring states that are burdened by Colorado pot.

Never mind that even the Obama policy emphasized a need for federal enforcement against drugged driving, damage to kids and neighboring states, and the presence of cartels and pot on federal land. Somehow, Colorado has a right to avoid these federal enforcement measures even the Obama administration wanted. Colorado politicians need to stop pandering and start leading, which means telling the truth about the severely negative consequences of big commercial pot.

Hickenlooper, Gardner, and other politicians tell us everything is rosy, but that's not what we hear from educators, cops, social workers, doctors, drug counselors, parents, and others in the trenches of the world's first anything goes marijuana free-for-all. It is not what we see in the streets.

If Hickenlooper and Gardner cared to lead on this issue, they would tell the world about the rate of pot-involved traffic fatalities that began soaring in their state in direct correlation with the emergence of legal recreational pot and Big Marijuana. They would talk about Colorado's status as a national leader in the growth of homelessness, which all major homeless shelter operators attribute to commercialized, recreational pot.

They would talk about the difficulty in keeping marijuana from crossing borders into states that don't allow it. They would spread the words of classroom educators and resource officers who say pot consumption among teens is out of control.

Honest leaders would talk about illegal grow operations invading neighborhoods and public lands. They would stop selling false, positive impressions about a failed policy for the sake of "respecting the will of voters" who made a mistake. They would not follow public perception but would lead it in a truthful direction.

Hickenlooper says legalization has eliminated illegal pot in Colorado, which is laughable to men and women who enforce the law and talk to us. El Paso County Sheriff Bill Elder speaks of more than 550 illegal rural home-grow operations in El Paso County alone.

Mayor John Suthers — Colorado's former U.S. attorney, attorney general, district prosecutor and state director of corrections — speaks of hundreds of illegal pot operations in Colorado Springs he hopes to raid. We could go on with countless accounts of leading law enforcers who describe illegal pot activity that exceeds limits of departmental budgets and personnel.

That's the small stuff, relative to the massive black market Colorado's legalization attracts to federal property.

Dave Condit, deputy forest and grassland supervisor for the Pike-San Isabel and Cimarron-Comanche National Grasslands, recently accompanied Forest Service officers on the raid of a Mexican cartel's major grow operation west of Colorado Springs. It was among at least 17 busts of cartel operations in the past 18 months. He describes the type of operation mostly based in Mexico, before legalization made Colorado more attractive. Condit said the agency lacks resources to make a dent in the additional cartel activity in the region's two national forests.

"It was eye opening to put on the camouflage and sneak through the woods at 4 in the morning," Condit told The Gazette's editorial board Friday. "I had no idea the scope of these plantations. These are huge farms hidden in the national forests. The cartels delimb the trees, so there is some green left on them. Other trees are cut down. They fertilize the plants extensively, and not all these fertilizers and chemicals are legal in this area.

"This is different than anything we have experienced in the past. These massive plantations are not the work of someone moving in from out of state who's going to grow a few plants or even try to grow a bunch of plants and sell them. These are massive supported plantations, with massive amounts of irrigation. The cartels create their own little reservoirs for water. These operations are guarded with armed

processors. They have little buildings on site. The suspects we have captured on these grows have all been Mexican nationals."

Condit said the black market invading Colorado's national forests has grown so large the entire budget for the Pike and San Isabel forests would not cover the costs of removing and remediating cartel grows in the forests he helps supervise.

"There's a massive amount of resource damage that has to be mitigated," Condit said. "You've got facilities and structures that have to be deconstructed. We would need to bring in air support to get materials out of there. There are tens of thousands of plants that have to be destroyed."

Condit hopes the Colorado Legislature will channel a portion of marijuana proceeds to the Forest Service to help pay for closure and reclamation of cartel operations. "For every plantation we find, there are many more," Condit said. Authorities captured only two cartel suspects in the raid Condit witnessed, and others escaped by foot into the woods.

"This operation had a huge stockpile of food. Hundreds and hundreds of giant cans (of food), and stacks of tortillas two or three people could not consume in months," Condit said. "So it appeared they were planning to bring in a large crew for the harvest. I wouldn't have thought you could hide something like that in our woods, but you can."

Officers seized a marijuana stash and plants worth an estimated \$35 million that morning. Merely destroying the plants presented a significant expense.

"Whether you're a recreational shooter, a weekend camper, or you're going to walk your dog in the woods, you should be concerned," Condit said. "Some of these people have guns. If you stumble into \$35 million worth of illegal plants, I'd be concerned. We are concerned for our own personnel."

