

AP 1.17.18 Paul Elias

Calaveras County, once pot-friendly, bans marijuana

A previously pot friendly rural Northern California county has reversed course and banned commercial marijuana farms, paving the way for lawsuits from growers who previously received permits and paid taxes.\

A newly constituted Calaveras County board of supervisors last week voted 3-2 to ban marijuana, giving some 200 farmers with permits about three months to wind down operations. The vote to ban occurred less than a month after California authorized retail sales of marijuana for recreational use in cities and counties that approve of pot operations within their borders.

Calaveras County growers with permits said Wednesday they are planning to sue. Each permit cost \$5,000 and the county has collected more than \$7 million in taxes from marijuana growers since 2016. **The economically struggling county of 44,000 residents initially embraced legalized marijuana as a way to generate revenue and recover from a devastating 2015 wildfire that displaced hundreds of residents and businesses.** The county used some of the marijuana tax to hire additional police and staff.

But four new board members were seated this month after winning election in November on campaign promises to ban marijuana.

“We have known this day could come and we have prepared for this eventuality for the last year,” said Trevor Witke, president of the Calaveras Cannabis Alliance farmers’ group. **“We are going to move forward with everyone who has been impacted by this decision.”** The farmers also said they may try to qualify a ballot measure to reverse the ban.

Marijuana has deeply divided financially Calaveras County, the famous setting of a Mark Twain short story located about 150 miles east of San Francisco.

Sheriff DiBasilio estimated the county, which is about the size of Rhode Island, **has more than 1,000 illegal farms in addition to the 200 licensed farmers and the hundreds more who had their applications pending.** **The influx has caused a backlash among residents and led to the ouster of some leaders who approved marijuana cultivation.**

Ban proponents complained that a sudden influx of new marijuana growers dramatically changed the region’s makeup and damaged the environment.