

Cannabis is coming to Salinas

NATALIE JACEWICZ 6:34 a.m. PST November 14, 2015



(Photo: Jeff Chiu / AP)

Andy Easton does not strike one as an alarmist. He has a benign smile that he powders liberally on coffee shop employees like patrons sprinkling sugar.

Other than NPR, which Easton calls "the most pompous, arrogant station," little seems to ruffle the feathers of a man who's been in the orchid business for 30 years. But his business, New Horizon Orchids, recently lost greenhouse space he's used for years. Easton points to marijuana to explain the greenhouse's quick turnover.

Now he wonders how legalizing the plant's cultivation in Salinas may alter agriculture.



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"My crystal ball is real cloudy," he said.

The future grew a little less murky in the Salinas City Council workshop on Nov. 9. A council subcommittee ended the 8-year-old moratorium on cannabis and approved a pilot program allowing three dispensaries for medical marijuana in Salinas as well as limited indoor cultivation.

City Attorney Chris Callihan will lead the effort to design potential models for the plant's introduction. How the marijuana will be grown during the pilot and afterwards presents environmental tradeoffs.

Chris Carrigan, director of the State Water Resources Control Board Office of Enforcement, issued a report last year that "marijuana cultivation operations on private and public lands cause enormous harm."

In absence of regulations and targeted enforcement, some marijuana growers illegally divert water toward their farms, depriving wildlife and the public, according to the report. Pesticides used on the plants, and even waste from makeshift toilets, flow into nearby water. The report features photos of illegally cleared land and eroded forest floors.

Aaron Johnson argues that marijuana growing need not look this way. Johnson, of L+G, LLP Attorneys at Law, represents marijuana growers interested in growing in Salinas. He advocated for indoor growing in regulated warehouses to introduce marijuana cultivation.

In addition to avoiding the hazards listed in Carrigan's report, regulated indoor growing tackles another common marijuana issue — the smell.

Indoor growing allows "air scrubbing," or purifying the air through a series of filters. Carbon filters, whose molecular shape allow bountiful surface area for other chemicals to bind, absorb odorous particles from the air. Once molecules have parked in all of the carbon's receptive sites, the filter is replaced.

"You could stand outside and not realize they're growing cannabis inside," said Johnson.

But indoor growing has its downsides, according to Sam Rashkin, an economic development consultant in Monterey County, namely its "very high carbon footprint." Marijuana requires a lot of light, and in indoor settings, that glow comes artificially. Growers may leave lights on for 12-24 hours per day. Evan Mills, a staff scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, pegged annual energy expenditures for indoor marijuana growth at 6 billion dollars in 2011.

Johnson claimed that indoor growing can become more efficient, but that the market will likely eventually dictate large scale growing in greenhouses, which provide natural light during the day.

And Salinas has no shortage of greenhouses — traditionally, at least.

When Easton's greenhouse owner began plans to sell before retirement, Easton said he expected the greenhouse would take a couple of years to sell. Not so.

"In one month, there were six people interested," Easton said.

Laws prohibited growing marijuana commercially in Salinas, so none of the prospective buyers identified themselves as marijuana growers, but Easton said he could easily tell that most of the purchasers wanted to grow the plant. He said instead of the typical suit and tie ensemble, these buyers wore T-shirts, claimed to grow essential oils, and offered to buy the greenhouse in cash.

Early movers were buying up greenhouses in a gamble on future legalization, according to Easton. He said that buying and retrofitting a greenhouse is far easier than meeting the regulations to build one from scratch, a process that can take at least two years.

"I consider these the smart people," he said.

Salinas already boasts Floricultura Pacific, the most technologically innovative greenhouse in the country by the estimates of its general manager, Don Howell.

"You could say we're the fanciest greenhouse in the U.S.," he said, as greenhouse computers scanned and sorted orchids cultured from tissue in a lab.

Marijuana growers may want to emulate such a technologically savvy model. Companies like California-based Forever Flowering Greenhouses already offer blackout tarps and ventilation systems that can help marijuana growers control light exposure and humidity in greenhouses.

But even in places where growing marijuana in greenhouses has been legal for a long time, not all greenhouse owners want to sell. Tom Perlite owns four greenhouses in San Francisco and seven in San Mateo County. When a prospective marijuana grower approached Perlite to rent space in his San Francisco greenhouses, Perlite turned him down. He was not eager to engage in the increased lighting and security required to grow marijuana.

"I'm wondering what they're going to do with the marijuana growers," he said of Salinas. "The way it is now, there's no regulation."

John Phillips, the supervisor of District 2 in Monterey County, seconds the need for regulation. He said the area should develop its own laws before the state does, but that the region has traditionally moved slowly relative to neighboring areas.

"Until our moratorium was passed, Monterey County was one of the few counties in the state without an ordinance either regulating or prohibiting marijuana cultivation and processing," Phillips said.

Salinas councilmember Jyl Lutes said that for now, the pilot will include indoor warehouses and greenhouses.

With regulation, citizens predicted Salinas holds great potential for marijuana growing.

"We're in the farming mecca of the world," one man said at the subcommittee workshop. "We have everything to make the finest cannabis in the world."

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