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A Greener Pennsylvania: Blazing a Trail



November 3, 2020 was a great day for marijuana. Four more states, Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota will join the 11 states that already permit recreational use. Pennsylvania, meanwhile, is lagging behind, especially at a time when Pennsylvania could use the economic boost from legalization. Gov. Tom Wolf and Lt. Gov. John Fetterman have come out publicly as advocates for legalization and marketed it as a big part of the state's COVID-19 recovery plan. We believe that the PA state government ought to go a step further and put in place sustainability-related requirements as they welcome the cannabis industry to the commonwealth. In reviewing the SDGs, cannabis links specifically to SDG 8: Decent work and

economic growth, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production, and SDG 15: Life on land.

The dangerous nature of illegal work, the barriers to employment imposed by the criminalization and stigma of cannabis users, as well as the increased tax revenues, job growth, and investment opportunities are all powerful incentives for legalization under SDG 8. Now more than ever, Pennsylvania is in need of funds to combat the economic hit from COVID-19 and legalization has historically been very positive for local economies.

The startling truth is SDG 10 will never be met as long as cannabis and other drug use and possession are criminalized and stigmatized. The overwhelming majority of those accused and/or convicted are minorities and socially marginalized people. A sustainable approach to cannabis is necessary to achieve income growth and reduced inequalities for poor and marginalized communities in Pennsylvania.

Since colonial times Pennsylvania has been a national leader in agriculture. Supporting SDG 12 and 15, cannabis production can be a green solution to Pennsylvania's farmlands. The sustainable development of cannabis provides a unique opportunity to protect, restore, and promote the responsible use of PA's ecosystems and biodiversity. We can flip the industry from one where workers and distributors are exploited and exposed to a biased judicial system, to one where the government puts in place regulations that put sustainability at the core of the industry.

Time for Change

The pandemic offers Governor Wolf a chance to boldly lead the state into new territory by tying the legalization of recreational marijuana to sustainability initiatives. In states such as Colorado, Washington, Michigan, and New Mexico, the government has either required or

strongly pushed for environmental remedies to the myriad eco challenges posed by cannabis farming and processing. It is a basic planetary need to tackle reducing energy consumption, water usage, agricultural runoff, and plastic packaging of the retail products. Pennsylvania must apply pressure on the industry that will have positive effects down the pipeline from producer to customer.

In looking to the future, new generations of farmers will have an opportunity to build a future in an industry on the rise, with new markets locally and around the country. Investors and the state government will have a chance to partner with start-ups tackling innovative means of shrinking cannabis' negative effects on the earth and our climate. There are companies developing hybrid greenhouses, vertical grow models, LED lights, and other technological improvements to support these advances. With the state income expected from the industry, we have the flexibility to, right at the outset, put tax breaks and structures in place to attract new businesses and create jobs. Although the federal regulation of marijuana as a controlled substance has limited research into the plant, our own Penn State has a model IPM program that could aid in sharing knowledge on the plants' needs to reduce wasted resources *and* money.

In examining the retail market possibilities, despite state control of alcohol and cheaper prices in neighboring states, PA remains one of the heaviest-drinking states in the country across multiple metrics. If the cannabis industry wants our customer base, they should be required to adhere to sustainability standards. Some may fear that companies will pass over us due to our laws, but do we really think that convenience won't still win out the day? Sure, I can drive to Trader Joe's and buy a \$4 frozen pizza while stuck home during quarantine... or I can pay *multiple*

fees to have one delivered on UberEats. Humans have a tendency to do both, allowing both grocery stores and delivery services to thrive.

In a Covid-19 world where we've all had to adopt to a "new normal," Pennsylvania should seize this opportunity to explicitly require sustainable choices across the cannabis industry. These choices will positively affect Pennsylvanians seeking justice, racial equity, careers in a budding industry, and those with farm land in need of new usage. We must not repeat the mistakes of the past, nor the miscalculations of other states who opened the doors to cannabis without sustainability regulations, only to retroactively try to implement them later. We must build the future we want for our state, our region, our country, and our planet.