

FRANCE MISSING OUT ON €10 BILLION ANNUAL CANNABIS MARKET

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France is emblematic of the hypocritical cannabis policies exhibited in Western Europe. More people consume cannabis in France than anywhere else in Europe, but despite recent amendments to the 1970 cannabis law, France is still missing out on a hugely profitable market.



(Pre-legislation march in Paris, 2015 | RFI)

Much of the international cannabis community revelled in the news that France was set to reform the criminalisation of cannabis users after the introduction of a new parliamentary report earlier this year. In fact, decriminalisation does little to support medical cannabis users and even less to generate a viable cannabis industry. Ten years after their trailblazing decriminalisation policies, Portugal are rethinking their approach to cannabis, which has stifled medical cannabis users, inhibited the economy and promoted the black market. France, with over five million consumers, should absolutely be doing the same.

Introduced on the 24th February, the report recommended introducing a fixed fine of €150 to €200 instead of mandatory prison sentences. The 'solution' was borne out of a need to control court congestion as the majority of drug convictions in 2016, were for drug use, rather than for traffic or sale. The burden of these convictions was falling on the police force, so the move to decriminalise drug use is one effort to support the police force in fighting drug trafficking.

However, the proposed legislation is a move to continue fighting the drug trade and there appears to be no clear indication that the ruling party wishes to legalise cannabis any time soon. In other words, the French government, in an attempt to free up the judiciary, have, yet again, left cannabis patients on the sidelines.

We spoke to Aurélien Bernard, a French cannabis entrepreneur, to understand what's going wrong in France. He is the founder of the first French cannabis media company 'Newsweed' and is a specialist in legal and worldwide cannabis news.



On the legislative developments expected in 2018...

France will make the first change to its 1970 legislation on cannabis this year. It is expected that a systematic €300 fine, the Poullet fine, named after the MP responsible for it, would be applied for any infraction such as possession or consumption in a public place. Unfortunately, we still cannot expect a thorough decriminalisation effort as the French government want to keep the option to serve jail sentences for recreational or medical users. Therefore, the penalty of 1 year of jail and/or a €3,750 fine, will still remain an option for the judiciary.

On the barriers to change...

It is very difficult to explain why France doesn't want to, at the very least, decriminalise cannabis. We have some of the harshest laws on cannabis in Europe with 144,000 arrests a year with officials estimating that France smokes 30 tonnes of cannabis a month.

The Poullet fine won't address any problems caused by cannabis. During debates on the topic, we have seen that the main barriers to change are the rigidity of the government, who are unwilling to let go of outdated cannabis stigmas. Another barrier could be the strength of the alcohol and tobacco industries in our country, but there is little evidence that they are obstructing the legislative process.

On the pro-legislation movement in France...

French cannabis activism is not as aggressive as it ought to be to lead a massive legal change, but we are seeing more active movements since the legalization of cannabis in United States and in Europe. For instance, NORML, the international cannabis advocacy group, has now established a presence in France.

On France's potential cannabis market...

France could create a really strong cannabis industry, and that's why the current situation is such nonsense. Instead on capitalizing on our assets and regulating cannabis like alcohol and cigarettes, the politicians language on cannabis dates back to Harry Anslinger.

We already have 3 million consumers a year and 300 000 unofficial growers. Our estimation is that a mature regulated market could generate €10 billions dollars a year. In effect, the market is already here!

From a medical point of view, cannabis could be as much a part of the pharmaceutical industry as opioid substance permitted in France.

As for the recreational angle, France already has grow shops, seeds shops and other CBD shops. Everything is legal except the plant itself.

Additionally, France also has a massive knowledge about cannabis cultivation and manufacturing. The black market use indoor technologies that could easily be professionalized and legitimized. French individuals who wants to work in cannabis industry export themselves abroad, in Spain or in California for example. A true regulation would reveal all of this underground wealth we have here. And as we like our "bières" for sipping wine and beer we would like to introduce "cannabisbières" to enjoy our French terror weed.

A forecast for the future?

Pragmatically, France is the only western European country not to allow medical cannabis under one form or another, and can't remain on our own. We have good relations with Germany and Canada and can't stay isolated, being the last country in Europe not to deliver cannabinoid-based medicine and prohibiting cannabis.

For the cannabis community, France paints a frustrating scene. While they possess all the key elements of a healthy and burgeoning cannabis industry, the government remains stubborn, rigid and, arguably, undemocratic in its approach to cannabis policies. However, France and Macron are diplomatic, and as neighbouring allies repeal their outdated cannabis approaches, they cannot remain a defector in the global shift towards legalisation.

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