

HIGHER TAXES ON LEGAL POT FAVOUR THE BLACK MARKET

When legal recreational pot goes on sale across Canada this fall, the most angry, disappointed people should be the criminals.

That's because from the time he first promised to end 95 years of cannabis prohibition during the 2015 election, Justin Trudeau has argued one of the main benefits of this change would be the damage it would inflict on the black market.

Gone would be the vast, underworld network supplying unregulated, possibly unsafe, cannabis to Canadians, including Canadian children. Gone would be outlaw dealers, some armed, some willing to commit violence to protect their turf.

It was a compelling argument then and it is a compelling argument now. But if the prime minister believes his own words, he should reject a new federal tax being proposed for cannabis. As well as boosting federal coffers, it might have the unintended consequence of boosting the black market.

The price of any product always influences prospective buyers.

The federal and provincial governments know from bitter experience that if they tax tobacco too heavily, smokers will buy a cheaper contraband product. And the black market tobacco industry has no compunction about selling to minors.

The same thing could happen with recreational cannabis sales if a recently proposed tax is implemented.

Health Canada wants to put an annual regulatory fee of 2.3 per cent on the gross revenues of big cannabis producers. That fee could raise an additional \$100 million a year in revenues, and proponents argue it would cover the government's regulatory costs for managing legal recreational pot by 2020, except for the costs of law enforcement.

At first glance, that seems reasonable. Why shouldn't recreational cannabis users and the profit-seeking producers of this product pay to regulate it, instead of all the Canadians who have no desire for a cannabis high?

But remember, this regulatory fee would be on top of the \$1-a-gram cannabis tax that will already be in place when legal sales start Oct. 17. This tax will raise hundreds of millions of dollars that will mainly go to provincial governments to cover the expenses they incur in the legal-cannabis era.

A coalition of Canada's biggest cannabis producers has already pushed back, warning the 2.3 per cent regulatory fee would hurt them and help their illegal competition.

It's tempting to conclude these producers are motivated by self-interest. But even if this is partially true, the federal government should proceed with caution, perhaps postponing talk of this fee for one or two years, until the legal industry is up and running and consumers have come to rely on it.

Conversely, barging ahead with this new fee could damage the entire industry, limiting the growth of existing legal producers while discouraging new businesses from opening.

The federal Liberals have come a long way in ending prohibition. But they must show sensitivity to market forces, especially in the early days of legal cannabis.

A new study by Environics Research, for instance, suggests Ottawa's plan to strictly regulate the legal cannabis market may backfire by making the black market product more attractive to many consumers.

This strategy insists on plain packaging, no branding and consumers being unable to see what they're buying before they pay for it. And the Environics report warns many consumers will reject this puritanical approach.

With just weeks left before legal cannabis sales, the government has no time to change its entire approach to regulation.

It can, however, put a hold on that proposed 2.3 per cent fee. And it can make the criminals unhappy.

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GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

MAKE NATURE YOUR BFF, SAYS MCGREGOR



MELANIE MCGREGOR
Column

We are now firmly in the middle of summer and experiencing all that this season has to offer. Sure, it's a great time to ditch the coats and sweaters and bask in the heat, but many health benefits of spending time in nature have also been touted and proven.

Among these are increasing the chemical serotonin in our brains, which can help with positive moods and increased energy, improving the quality of our sleep, and helping us relax and manage stress better.

When life gets busy, how can we fit in outdoor time? Try these easy tips to get on the path to making nature your new BFF:

- Move your regular ac-

tivities outdoors. If you like to read, play games, meditate, or enjoy a cool drink, take it outside to a patio, hammock, or picnic blanket.

- Use small amounts of time. Don't feel you have to increase your time in nature by hours every day to make a difference. Start small by taking a walk or sitting outside for 10 minutes on your lunch break. Take a stroll around the block if a longer trek isn't in the cards on a busy day.

- Be mindful. When people hear "mindfulness," they often think of colouring, but mindfulness is anything that helps you focus fully and completely on what you are experiencing in this moment without being distracted by other demands and worries.

Nature is a buffet for all of your senses so, breathe in the fresh air, listen to the birds, and take off your shoes and feel the cool grass on your feet. Slow down and reflect on all of these experiences without feeling like to need to rush

off to the next thing on your to-do list.

- Make it social. Want to catch up with your kids? Got a meeting at work that doesn't require a table or screen? Take it outside. Walking side-by-side can make people feel more at ease, creative, and willing to open up.

In our CMHA office courtyard, there is a picnic table that becomes popular for meetings and lunch during the warm months - a nice break and change of scenery.

Whether it's the park, the forest, or your very own backyard, nature awaits!

Melanie McGregor is the Communications and Advancement Specialist at the Canadian Mental Health Association Halton Region Branch, which provides mental health and addictions community support and education. Visit www.halton.cmha.ca for more information and follow @cmhahalton on Twitter for news and updates.

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