

Cannabis Takes Center Stage at California State Fair

California's state fair has moved to become the first event of its kind by allowing the sale and consumption of marijuana on its grounds when its 2024 edition unfolds in July.

Fair planners on Tuesday announced the decision to allow visitors to buy and use cannabis at the 17-day event beginning July 12, touting it as a watershed moment in the relationship between weed and the US, where about half of Americans now live in states where marijuana is legalized. Among those states is California, which legalized marijuana production in 2016 – and is on track to be the first to sell cannabis legally at a fair, officials said.

Groundbreaking Milestone

“Hosting cannabis sales and consumption is a groundbreaking milestone in destigmatization,” said Lauren Carpenter, the co-founder of Embarc, a company preparing to manage an experiential marijuana dispensary at the state fair's site. Carpenter also noted that the fair, held in Sacramento, would expand its educational cannabis exhibit and cultivation awards competition that debuted in 2022.

Legal Framework and Expansion

Cannabis sales through Embarc's on-site dispensary, the expanded exhibit, and awards competition became possible after California governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation authorizing licensed cannabis events. Carpenter described these elements as “a major step forward for responsible normalization” of cannabis, showcasing the plant alongside other California agricultural staples.

Enhanced Competition and Engagement

James Leitz, the contest's executive producer, said the competition had added categories recognizing pre-rolls, concentrates, cartridges, edibles, beverages, and wellness products. The expanded contest drew more than 500 entries, double the amount from 2023. Leitz expressed hope that the competition would allow patrons to engage with and consume winning brands, transforming public understanding of cannabis.

Amplifying California's Agricultural Bounty

Tom Martinez, the state fair's chief executive officer, emphasized that the inclusion of onsite sales and consumption would amplify California's rich agricultural bounty and facilitate storytelling for farmers from diverse backgrounds.

Public Perception and Environmental Concerns

These changes come as marijuana becomes increasingly decriminalized and accepted, especially by younger Americans. However, some criticisms of legalization focus on the environmental impact of cannabis cultivation, which can be energy-intensive and demand significant water resources.

New Consumption Lounge

A focal point of the revamped cannabis exhibit and competition at the fair will be a new 30,000 sq ft consumption lounge, where attendees over 21 can try products from award-winning farms and brands across the state.

California's state fair in 2023 reported about 590,000 attendees, and the 2024 edition is expected to draw even more interest with the inclusion of cannabis sales and consumption.

Email: info@cannabisriskmanager.com | Phone: +415-226-4060

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