

Truckers Favor Rescheduling Cannabis, But Industry Flags Potential Risks

The country's leading trucking trade group is raising concerns over the potential safety risks associated with the proposed rescheduling of marijuana. While many truck drivers support the move, the American Trucking Associations (ATA) has issued a stark warning, suggesting that the change could lead to "significant negative consequences" for both the industry and other motorists on the road.

ATA's Concerns Over Cannabis Rescheduling

In a letter to U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, the ATA outlined its concerns about the reclassification of marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule III under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). Although the ATA does not have a formal stance on cannabis legalization, it emphasized the potential public health and safety risks.

"We remain concerned about the broad public health and safety consequences of reclassification on the national highway system and its users," wrote Dan Horvath, ATA's senior vice president of regulatory affairs and safety policy. The group is advocating for the Department of Transportation (DOT) to retain the ability to conduct drug testing for marijuana use among commercial drivers and other safety-sensitive transportation workers.

CBD and Its Medical Benefits

The debate comes amid growing recognition of the potential medical benefits of cannabis, including its use in treating pain, cancer, schizophrenia, COVID-19, and other conditions. However, the ATA stresses that maintaining stringent testing protocols is crucial to transportation safety.

"It is critical for transportation safety that we maintain the scope and scrutiny of testing that currently exists for individuals engaged in safety-sensitive industries," Horvath added. He expressed concern over a potential increase in marijuana-impaired driving following a federal rescheduling and committed to working with DOT and other stakeholders to prevent marijuana-related crashes and fatalities.

Truck Drivers Support Rescheduling

Despite the ATA's warnings, many individual truck drivers have voiced their support for rescheduling. During the public comment period on the proposed rule change, numerous truckers have submitted comments in favor of the reclassification.

As reported by Freight Waves, the comments from truckers overwhelmingly favor rescheduling, often anonymously. Many drivers highlighted the inconsistencies between restrictions on marijuana and alcohol consumption.

Driver Perspectives

One driver commented, “We can go have drinks after we get done from a long day (partaking in something that is known to cause death and serious injuries when incoherent) but we can’t smoke something that has medical benefits, something that will help truckers sleep better at night, deal with pain from being behind the wheel and [from] basic physical activity from the job, and deal with stress anxiety of the job and being away from home.”

Another driver pointed out the unfairness of losing their job and license due to marijuana use detected long after actual consumption. “I believe it is unfair that I can lose my job and my license if I have used marijuana and a month later I can still lose my job if I come out ‘dirty’ in a random drug test,” they wrote.

ATA’s Stance on Impairment and Testing

In its letter to Buttigieg, the ATA emphasized that marijuana and alcohol are the most detected drugs in impaired driving crashes that result in serious or fatal injuries. The group did not compare the relative harms caused by the substances but reiterated that marijuana remains the most frequently used drug by drivers.

Impact on Driver Shortage

The debate over marijuana policy is also tied to the ongoing driver shortage in the trucking industry. A report from the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI) noted a 65,000-driver deficit and highlighted the impact of current drug testing policies on the industry. The fear of positive tests for marijuana metabolites, which can remain in a person’s system long after use, may be deterring potential drivers.

Public and Industry Views on Cannabis Laws

A survey by ATRI found that 72.4 percent of licensed U.S. truck drivers support loosening cannabis laws and testing policies, and 66.5 percent believe marijuana should be federally legalized. This sentiment reflects broader public support for cannabis reform.

The Call for Updated Testing Methods

Some industry stakeholders suggest that current marijuana testing procedures should be replaced with methods that measure active impairment rather than the presence of metabolites. This approach could address concerns about safety while acknowledging the medical and recreational use of cannabis.

Moving Forward with Cannabis Reform

Cannabis reform advocates continue to push for changes in federal policies that they view as outdated and discriminatory. They argue that the current approach contributes to labor shortages and supply chain issues.

“Tens of thousands of workers are leaving the commercial trucking industry because the federal government refuses to update its antiquated marijuana policies,” Paul Armentano, deputy director of NORML, wrote in a Marijuana Moment op-ed. He emphasized the need for policies that reflect the realities of modern cannabis use and its legal status in many states.

As the debate over marijuana rescheduling continues, the trucking industry and its workforce remain divided. While the ATA warns of potential safety risks, many drivers advocate for a more balanced approach that recognizes the medical benefits of cannabis and the need for updated testing methods. The outcome of this debate will have significant implications for both highway safety and the future of the trucking industry.

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

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