

Hemp Industry Funds Florida GOP After Veto, Group Chat Revealed

Hemp Industry Raises \$1.7M for Florida GOP After DeSantis' Veto of Anti-Hemp Bill

The Republican Party of Florida has received a significant financial boost, thanks to a rapid fundraising effort by hemp companies just days after Governor Ron DeSantis vetoed a bill that would have severely impacted the industry. New finance reports reveal that the hemp sector contributed at least \$1.7 million to the party, sparking allegations of quid pro quo and raising questions about the future of the state's cannabis industry.

Grassroots Effort or Quid Pro Quo?

The fundraising blitz took place over a WhatsApp group chat called "Save Florida Hemp," where hemp executives, smoke shop owners, and distributors were urged to wire money to the Republican Party of Florida. The call to action began on June 25, giving participants just 72 hours to contribute \$2 million, with a longer-term goal of raising an additional \$3 million over the next six months.

Critics have denounced the fundraising as a quid pro quo deal, implying a direct exchange of financial support for political favors. However, hemp industry leaders view it as a necessary response to the veto, which saved them from potentially crippling regulations. "We are currently seen as DeSantis' allies to defeat the recreational ballot initiative," one message in the chat read, reinforcing the perception of mutual support between the hemp sector and the governor.

The Numbers Behind the Donations

According to reports, the Republican Party of Florida raised a total of \$16 million between April and August 16, with at least \$1.7 million linked to the hemp industry. This figure, derived from donor descriptions such as "hemp" and "tobacco" and cross-referenced with names in the group chat, highlights the substantial financial clout the hemp sector wielded during the fundraising push.

Among the top contributors were Orlando-based Ciaccio Enterprises and California's Torch Enterprises, each donating \$250,000, and Fort Lauderdale's Mellow Fellow, which contributed \$150,000. Additional major donors included Lifted Liquids from Wisconsin and Outpost Brands LLC from Daytona Beach, each giving \$100,000. Notably, Ciaccio Enterprises and Mellow Fellow were key organizers within the group chat, emphasizing the coordinated nature of the fundraising drive.

Hemp Industry Denies Allegations of Political Payback

Despite the fundraising's timing and scope, industry leaders and the Republican Party maintain that there was no quid pro quo deal. They argue that the effort was about supporting a governor who stood by their industry during a critical moment. "For us, it was just having support from someone who supported us," said Arby Barroso, an executive with Mellow Fellow. "When someone supports you, you support them back. There was

no other reason, no hitch to it.”

Others, like Yomaira Pineiro, founder of American Hemp Agents, emphasized the need for proper representation in Tallahassee as the driving force behind the donations. “The only reason the money was brought together was so we can have proper representation in Tallahassee,” she said, downplaying any ulterior motives behind the fundraising.

Trulieve’s Role and Industry Tensions

The hemp industry’s donations come amid escalating tensions with Trulieve, Florida’s largest medical marijuana company. Trulieve has been a major backer of Amendment 3, the upcoming recreational marijuana ballot initiative, investing over \$70 million in support of the measure. Hemp leaders fear that if Amendment 3 passes, it will favor established medical marijuana companies, potentially marginalizing smaller hemp businesses.

Steve Vancore, a spokesperson for Trulieve, refuted claims that the company has actively worked to undermine the hemp industry, labeling such allegations as baseless. He also denied that Trulieve lobbied for the anti-hemp bill vetoed by DeSantis, adding that their involvement was limited to addressing specific provisions affecting medical marijuana companies.

Amendment 3: A Divisive Issue

As the November vote on Amendment 3 approaches, the battle lines between the hemp and marijuana industries are becoming more pronounced. Many in the hemp sector view the amendment as a direct threat, with one message in the WhatsApp chat warning that the initiative could spell disaster for the state’s hemp businesses.

“Here’s the reality: if Amendment 3 goes through, all the Hemp businesses in Florida that sell intoxicating products are toast,” the message read, calling on the industry’s 10,000-plus small businesses and their employees to vote against the measure.

For hemp executives like Barroso, the issue is not legalization itself but rather how the amendment is structured. “Our fight’s not with [legalization]... Our fight’s really with the way they wrote up the ballot,” he said, expressing concerns that the amendment’s provisions would disproportionately benefit established players like Trulieve.

A Strategy for Survival

With the fundraising drive winding down and the group chat mostly inactive, the hemp industry is now focused on direct outreach to store owners and other stakeholders. The sector’s leaders are determined to keep their businesses afloat amid regulatory challenges and market competition.

“We’re a pretty tight-knit community,” Barroso said. “We’re trying our best to stay alive.”

As the debate over cannabis regulation in Florida intensifies, the hemp industry’s fundraising efforts underscore the high stakes at play. With millions of dollars pouring into the fight from both sides, the outcome of Amendment 3 could reshape the state’s cannabis landscape for years to come.

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