

NC Tribal Lands See Surge in Recreational Cannabis Sales

More Than 4,000 Consumers Make History at Great Smoky Cannabis Co. in Cherokee, NC

This past weekend marked a historic moment as more than 4,000 consumers flocked to the Great Smoky Cannabis Co. store in Cherokee, North Carolina. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) made history as the first Indigenous tribe to open a regulated cannabis marketplace under tribal sovereignty, a move that precedes the legalization of marijuana in its home state.

A Milestone in Cannabis Sales

On Saturday, adult-use cannabis sales began, and the store became a groundbreaking venture in the U.S. cannabis market. Cherokee's role in this new era of marijuana retailing highlights the tribe's autonomy in regulating commerce within its territory, despite North Carolina's continued prohibition of cannabis. Visitors, some traveling over six hours to reach the Southern Appalachian Mountains, were eager to purchase products such as flower, edibles, vapes, and tinctures.

The turnout exceeded expectations, with lines stretching from sunrise to sunset, and customers waiting hours to browse the store's extensive selection. Forrest Parker, a member of the EBCI and general manager of Qualla Enterprises, the tribe's vertically integrated cannabis company, expressed immense pride in the accomplishment.

"This is the most inspiring thing that I've ever been a part of," Parker told. "To walk the crowd and hear people thanking you for being there, that really gives you a sense of purpose."

Meeting Cannabis Demand

In preparation for the launch, the EBCI ensured the store was well-equipped to handle high volumes of sales. More than 150 staff members were trained to manage the influx of customers, and over 350 product types, known as stock-keeping units (SKUs), were available. Flower made up about 40% of total sales during the weekend, with strict limits imposed to maintain inventory throughout the following weeks.

According to Parker, sales of infused edibles surpassed projections, but overall, the product categories and sales percentages stayed in line with initial forecasts. As the demand grows, the store plans to expand its product range to 500 SKUs by January.

A New Tourist Hotspot

Located near Great Smoky Mountain National Park, which attracts millions of visitors annually, the store's location positions it as a new draw for tourists. As the only cannabis retailer in a region where marijuana

remains illegal in neighboring states, Great Smoky Cannabis Co. is expected to become a popular destination for both local and out-of-state visitors. The shop also benefits from its proximity to various recreational activities and the tribe's renowned cultural experiences.

“We're a destination town that has visitors from all over the world every single day throughout the year,” Parker noted. “And we're bringing a lot of new folks to our town as a result of cannabis that will engage in other activities, such as our culture, gaming, and our recreational outdoor activities like fishing, mountain biking, and hiking.”

A Tribe's Evolving History

For the EBCI, the launch of the cannabis market represents more than just economic opportunity; it marks a new chapter in the tribe's history. With 90% of the workforce composed of tribal members, the Great Smoky Cannabis Co. has fostered deeper connections between generations. Parker described the overwhelming support from community elders as a rare and uplifting experience.

“A lot of the history of cannabis – specifically with our people – hasn't been documented for a lot of reasons you can imagine,” he said. The effort to legalize adult-use cannabis has connected elders with younger members of the tribe in unprecedented ways, bridging a generational gap.

“This is a very local effort with a lot of heart and soul in it,” Parker added, emphasizing the significance of the initiative. “A lot of people are working for a cause that's much bigger than themselves.”

The Path to Tribal Legalization

The journey to legalization on the Qualla Boundary, the tribal land of the EBCI, began nearly four years ago. Members of the tribe voted to legalize recreational cannabis about a year ago, making it possible for the store to open. Since then, Great Smoky Cannabis Co. had already begun selling to members of other federally recognized Native American tribes before expanding to all adult-use consumers over the weekend.

Parker described the long road to the tribe's legal cannabis market as challenging but immensely rewarding. “It's been three-plus years in the making, and just to see that unfold – the turnout and the response – it's just so validating,” he reflected.

Looking Ahead

As Great Smoky Cannabis Co. continues to grow, Parker remains committed to the store's mission of serving the EBCI community while contributing to a broader movement within the cannabis industry. The store has already proven itself as a symbol of tribal sovereignty and a beacon for future cannabis ventures.

“We're just humbled and appreciative and honored to be doing this with our community, for our community,” Parker said. “And we're so thankful for all the people that are supporting us.”

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