

# New GOP Senate Leader Opposes Cannabis Legalization Efforts

## Senate Republicans Elect John Thune as Majority Leader, Cementing Opposition to Federal Cannabis Reform

Senate Republicans on Wednesday elected Senator John Thune of South Dakota as their new majority leader, marking a significant shift in the legislative outlook for federal marijuana policy. Thune, who defeated Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Rick Scott (R-FL) in the leadership race, has consistently voiced opposition to cannabis legalization, criticized efforts to expand industry access to banking, and called for halting the Biden administration's push to reschedule marijuana.

### Thune's Stance on Cannabis Rescheduling

One of Thune's most recent and outspoken actions against cannabis reform came in the form of a letter, co-signed by other GOP lawmakers in July, challenging the Biden administration's proposal to reschedule marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule III under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). The letter urged the administration to withdraw its proposal, claiming it lacked sufficient scientific and medical justification.

The letter argued that the rescheduling initiative "fails to provide adequate science and data to support moving marijuana to Schedule III." It labeled the decision as "irresponsible" and expressed concerns about the health implications of marijuana use.

### Health Concerns Raised by Thune and GOP Lawmakers

Thune and his colleagues outlined various health risks they associate with marijuana use, citing research that claims a connection between cannabis consumption and issues such as psychosis, anxiety, and cognitive decline. They also pointed to alleged associations with respiratory problems, cardiovascular conditions, gastrointestinal disorders, and cancer.

Further, the letter emphasized concerns about marijuana's impact on mental health, noting studies that purportedly link cannabis use to worsening symptoms in veterans with PTSD, increased violent behavior, and alcohol abuse.

In a striking claim, the letter also alleged that sexual dysfunction rates were twice as high among men who used marijuana, adding another dimension to their argument against reform.

### Questioning Marijuana's Medical Value

Beyond the health risks, Thune's letter cast doubt on the medical efficacy of cannabis. It criticized the framing of marijuana as medicine, particularly products sold at dispensaries, such as edibles and vapes with flavors like "wild cherry" and "sour apple."

“Pretending that these products are medicine that can treat health conditions is doing a disservice to Americans,” the letter stated, arguing that marijuana has “no currently accepted medical use.” Thune and his colleagues further dismissed state-level medical marijuana programs as insufficient to redefine the drug’s status under federal law.

## **A History of Opposition to Cannabis Banking**

Thune’s opposition to marijuana policy reform extends beyond rescheduling. He has been a vocal critic of efforts to provide banking access to the cannabis industry, which remains largely excluded from traditional financial systems due to federal prohibition.

In 2021, as Senate Democrats advanced a marijuana legalization bill, Thune commented that the issue was one Congress “would probably have to grapple with.” However, his actions have consistently undermined such efforts.

Earlier this year, he deemed the idea of attaching cannabis banking legislation to an aviation bill as “a non-starter,” reflecting what he described as “very strong” Republican opposition. His resistance to cannabis banking dates back years, including a 2020 floor speech in which he lambasted a Democratic proposal to include marijuana banking reform in a coronavirus relief package.

Thune dismissed the inclusion as “crazy stuff,” pointing out that the text of the bill mentioned “cannabis” more times than “jobs,” a jab aimed at highlighting what he saw as misplaced priorities.

## **Implications for Federal Cannabis Policy**

Thune’s election as majority leader solidifies a leadership team that is likely to resist significant federal marijuana reform, presenting a challenging landscape for cannabis advocates. His leadership may influence the Senate’s approach to cannabis policy in several key ways:

**Blocking Rescheduling Efforts:** With Thune at the helm, Senate Republicans are likely to continue opposing the Biden administration’s marijuana rescheduling initiative. This could delay or derail efforts to move cannabis to Schedule III, a classification that would ease research barriers and reduce tax burdens on cannabis businesses.

**Obstructing Banking Reform:** Cannabis banking legislation, such as the Secure and Fair Enforcement Regulation (SAFER) Banking Act, faces an uphill battle with Thune as majority leader. His longstanding opposition suggests little room for compromise on this issue, leaving cannabis businesses to navigate ongoing financial challenges.

**Shaping the Debate on Health Risks:** Thune’s focus on marijuana’s alleged health risks could influence the broader narrative around cannabis reform, reinforcing skepticism among lawmakers who remain undecided on the issue.

**Setting Legislative Priorities:** As majority leader, Thune will have considerable control over the Senate’s agenda, likely prioritizing other issues over cannabis reform and potentially stalling related bills in committee.

## **GOP Resistance to Cannabis Policy Reform**

Thune’s opposition to marijuana reform reflects broader Republican skepticism about cannabis policy changes. While public support for legalization has grown—polls show that nearly two-thirds of Americans

favor it—many GOP lawmakers remain wary, citing concerns about public health, youth access, and law enforcement challenges.

Republican resistance has already stymied several high-profile cannabis initiatives in recent years. For instance, the MORE Act, which sought to legalize cannabis federally, passed the House but failed to gain traction in the Senate. Similarly, the SAFE Banking Act has been repeatedly stalled despite bipartisan support in the House.

### **The Path Forward for Cannabis Advocates**

Despite these obstacles, cannabis advocates remain hopeful that incremental progress can be made. Rescheduling marijuana to Schedule III, while far from full legalization, would represent a significant step forward, as it would signal federal recognition of cannabis's medical value.

Proponents of cannabis banking reform also continue to push for bipartisan solutions, emphasizing the economic and public safety benefits of allowing cannabis businesses to access financial services.

### **A Polarized Landscape**

Thune's leadership underscores the polarization surrounding cannabis policy in Washington. While Democrats have championed legalization and reform efforts, many Republicans have doubled down on their opposition, citing concerns about public health and societal impacts.

This divide mirrors broader cultural and political tensions, with cannabis policy becoming a proxy battle for deeper ideological disagreements about the role of government, public health, and personal freedoms.

### **A New Era of Challenges**

As Senate majority leader, John Thune is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of federal cannabis policy. His opposition to legalization, rescheduling, and banking reform sets the stage for continued battles in Congress, with cannabis advocates facing an uphill fight to advance their agenda.

For now, the election of Thune signals a period of uncertainty for the cannabis industry, which must navigate a landscape where federal reform remains elusive despite growing public support. The road ahead will require persistent advocacy and bipartisan collaboration to overcome the barriers posed by Thune's leadership and the broader Republican resistance to cannabis reform.

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