

Cannabis Caucus Chair Highlights Top Congressional Priorities

Cannabis Reform Remains Elusive Despite Renewed Efforts in Congress

With the 119th Congress underway, U.S. Representative Dina Titus is spearheading renewed efforts to pass long-awaited cannabis reform. As the newly appointed co-chair of the Congressional Cannabis Caucus, alongside Representative Ilhan Omar, Titus has her sights set on advancing key legislation. Her agenda includes improving banking access for cannabis businesses, easing medical marijuana access for veterans, and enhancing opportunities for scientific research.

These proposals reflect familiar objectives that have long eluded lawmakers, underscoring the persistent challenges in aligning federal policy with the evolving cannabis landscape across the states.

Legislative Priorities for the 119th Congress

Representative Titus has identified several priority bills for the new Congress, including:

SAFER Banking Act: Aimed at allowing financial institutions to work with state-regulated cannabis businesses without fear of federal penalties.

Veterans Equal Access Act: Focused on granting veterans access to medical marijuana through the Veterans Administration system.

Higher Education Cannabis Research Act: Designed to enable colleges and universities to conduct cannabis research with approval from state or tribal authorities.

While these bills are widely supported across party lines, their repeated failures to advance in previous sessions highlight the enduring gridlock in Washington, D.C. Titus acknowledges the uphill battle, noting the federal government's sluggishness in catching up to state-level cannabis reforms.

Progress and Roadblocks in Federal Cannabis Policy

The federal government has made minimal progress in cannabis reform over the years. To date, Congress has passed only one standalone marijuana bill—the Medical Marijuana and Cannabidiol Research Expansion Act in 2022. Though a milestone, the bill was criticized for its narrow scope and limited impact.

Efforts to address banking reform have been particularly frustrating. Despite passing the House seven times, the SAFER Banking Act has consistently stalled in the Senate. Even under Democratic leadership, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer refrained from calling the bill to a vote, citing insufficient Republican support. With Republicans now in control of both chambers, the path forward appears even more uncertain.

Bipartisan Support Amid Divided Leadership

Despite these challenges, cannabis reform continues to enjoy bipartisan support. Prominent Republican lawmakers like Representatives Dave Joyce of Ohio and Brian Mast of Florida have been vocal advocates for initiatives such as banking reform and veterans' access to medical marijuana.

Titus and her Republican colleagues are also pushing to address loopholes in the Farm Bill that allow hemp-derived THC products to flood the market. These products, which mimic marijuana's psychoactive effects, have created regulatory confusion and public safety concerns.

However, Republican leadership in both the House and Senate remains skeptical of broader cannabis legalization. The newly seated Senate, under Republican Leader John Thune, is unlikely to prioritize cannabis reform. This reluctance extends to other high-ranking Republicans, such as House Speaker Mike Johnson, who declined to advance cannabis banking legislation during the previous session.

State Progress Highlights Federal Inaction

As federal policymakers debate the merits of cannabis reform, states continue to lead the charge. Recreational marijuana is now legal in 24 states, with Ohio joining the list in 2023. These state-level advancements are often seen as indicators of shifting public sentiment, which could influence future Congressional action.

However, the election of conservative figures like Bernie Moreno to the Senate from Ohio suggests that state legalization does not always translate into federal support. Moreno, a political newcomer, has yet to establish a clear stance on cannabis reform.

This disconnect between state progress and federal inaction fuels frustration among advocates and stakeholders. The growing cannabis industry, valued at billions of dollars, operates within a patchwork of state laws while navigating the risks of federal prohibition.

The Role of Rescheduling and Descheduling Cannabis

The Biden administration's attempt to reschedule marijuana under federal law has added another layer of complexity to the cannabis policy debate. In October 2022, the administration initiated a review to potentially reclassify marijuana as a less harmful substance. However, progress has been slow, with recent delays attributed to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and ongoing bureaucratic hurdles.

While rescheduling could ease some restrictions, many advocates argue that full descheduling is necessary to eliminate the federal-state conflict entirely. Titus has emphasized the importance of Congressional action to establish clear and consistent cannabis policy, particularly in the face of administrative uncertainty.

"Descheduling" marijuana would remove it from the Controlled Substances Act, effectively legalizing it at the federal level. This move would open the door for states to regulate cannabis without fear of federal interference, aligning federal policy with the realities on the ground.

The Outlook Under a New Administration

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency in January 2025 introduces new variables to the cannabis reform debate. During his first term, Trump expressed limited support for marijuana reform, but recent statements suggest a potential shift in his stance. In late 2024, Trump voiced support for rescheduling marijuana and backed an adult-use legalization measure in Florida.

While it remains unclear whether these statements signal a genuine policy shift, they could influence Congressional Republicans to reconsider their positions. Titus has expressed cautious optimism that Trump's evolving rhetoric may create new opportunities for reform.

At the same time, advocates remain wary of relying on executive action alone. They stress the importance of Congressional engagement to ensure lasting change, particularly as the political landscape continues to evolve.

A Pivotal Moment for Cannabis Reform

As the 119th Congress convenes, the stakes for cannabis reform have never been higher. Lawmakers like Representative Dina Titus are working tirelessly to advance legislation that addresses critical issues such as banking access, veterans' healthcare, and scientific research.

However, persistent gridlock in Washington threatens to derail these efforts once again. The contrast between state-level progress and federal inaction highlights the urgent need for a unified approach to cannabis policy.

With the return of Donald Trump to the White House and shifting dynamics in Congress, 2025 could be a pivotal year for the cannabis industry and its advocates. Whether through incremental reforms or sweeping changes, the fight for cannabis justice is far from over.

The path forward will require bipartisan cooperation, strategic advocacy, and unwavering commitment to the principles of fairness and equity. For now, the cannabis community waits with cautious optimism, hoping that this Congress will finally deliver the progress they've long sought.

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