

Montana Senate Backs Bill to Redirect Cannabis Revenue

Montana Senate Advances Bill to Redirect Cannabis Tax Revenue Away from Conservation

The Montana Senate on Thursday advanced a measure to change how more than \$60 million in recreational marijuana tax revenue is distributed, shifting funds away from conservation programs to law enforcement and addiction treatment.

Senate Bill 307 Aims to Reallocate Funds to Drug Prevention and Law Enforcement

Senate Majority Leader Tom McGillvray, R-Billings, introduced Senate Bill 307, which seeks to redirect marijuana tax revenue from Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) programs to bolster marijuana prevention and enforcement operations.

McGillvray described the bill as a “simple” policy choice between prioritizing the well-being of children and those affected by cannabis addiction over wildlife conservation efforts. He added that FWP already has sufficient funds and urged legislators to focus on supporting individuals struggling with addiction.

Opposition Argues That Conservation Funding Should Remain Intact

Opponents of SB 307 contended that the original allocation of funds to conservation programs was intentional and should not be altered. Senator Sara Novak, D-Anaconda, emphasized that the revenue allocation was carefully decided during the 2021 session when recreational marijuana was legalized.

Public Hearing Draws Strong Opinions from Both Sides

During a lengthy hearing before the Senate Business, Labor, and Economic Affairs Committee, drug prevention specialists and law enforcement representatives spoke in favor of the bill. However, they were outnumbered by more than 20 opponents from conservation groups.

FWP Director Christy Clark testified against the bill, citing that several crucial programs would be “virtually eliminated” without funding, including a wildlife tracking system and maintenance efforts for state parks.

Amendments Adjust Funding Distribution, But Concerns Persist

The bill was amended to remove provisions for a marijuana prevention account and a suicide prevention grant program. It also restored funding for veterans and the state Board of Crime Control.

Under the revised bill, 26% of marijuana tax revenue would be allocated to the Healing and Ending Addiction through Recovery and Treatment (HEART) Fund, 4% would support a new marijuana law enforcement account, and smaller portions would go to veterans and crime control programs. The remaining funds would be directed to the general fund.

Lawmakers Split Over the Future Use of Cannabis Tax Revenue

Proponents of SB 307 emphasized the need to address issues arising from high-potency THC products and increase support for addiction treatment and law enforcement efforts.

Senator Mike Yakawich, R-Billings, shared his personal experiences with marijuana use in the 1970s, attributing health issues to the drug. He framed the bill as a “wise allocation of money,” allowing legislators to adjust the funding if necessary in the future.

Conversely, Senator Emma Kerr-Carpenter, D-Billings, questioned why lawmakers must choose between conservation and public health funding, arguing that both could be supported simultaneously.

McGillvray Stands Firm, Citing Logical Budget Allocation

McGillvray reiterated his stance that FWP has ample funds and that using marijuana tax revenue for its associated harms is the logical course of action.

Final Senate Vote and Committee Hearing Scheduled

The Senate passed SB 307 in a 30-20 vote, with two Republicans joining all Democrats in opposition. The bill now heads to the Senate Finance and Claims Committee for further discussion. A final vote in the full Senate is expected soon.

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