

Congress Probes Chinese Role in Illegal Cannabis Operations

Congressional Committee Schedules Hearing on Chinese ‘Invasion’ Through Illegal Cannabis Operations

On September 12, 2025, congressional leaders announced plans for a high-profile hearing examining what some lawmakers have described as a Chinese “invasion” of the United States through illicit marijuana operations. The hearing, scheduled for Thursday, September 18, will be convened by the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, & Accountability, which is chaired by Republican members who have increasingly spotlighted alleged foreign links to underground cannabis cultivation.

A Dramatic Title Signals a Contentious Session

The hearing, formally titled “*Invasion of the Homeland: How China is Using Illegal Marijuana to Build a Criminal Network Across America*,” underscores the charged language surrounding this issue. While details remain scarce about the witnesses who will testify or the precise scope of the session, the framing alone signals that lawmakers intend to cast the discussion as a matter of national security rather than merely a domestic criminal enforcement challenge.

Longstanding Concerns About Chinese-Linked Cannabis Activity

The connection between illicit cannabis grows and alleged Chinese involvement has been a recurring theme in congressional debates over the past several years. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) claimed in 2024 that thousands of licensed medical marijuana businesses in Oklahoma had been flagged for suspicious activity with ties to Chinese nationals. Similarly, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) has raised alarms about cannabis grow houses in her home state that federal officials reportedly linked to Chinese entities.

These concerns have often been couched in the language of transnational organized crime, with lawmakers suggesting that cannabis cultivation could be exploited as a revenue stream for criminal networks operating beyond U.S. borders.

Legislative Attention Intensifies

Congressional interest in the issue has been formalized in recent spending directives. In a report accompanying the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies (CJS) appropriations bill, lawmakers

instructed federal agencies to investigate illicit marijuana grows, specifically asking for analysis of “any connections or links to Chinese transnational criminal organizations and/or the government of the People’s Republic of China.”

The mandate reflects a bipartisan appetite for stronger oversight of foreign involvement in cannabis-related crime, though Republicans have been far more vocal in framing the matter as a pressing threat to national security.

Advocacy Groups Amplify the Narrative

Outside of Congress, prohibitionist organizations have seized on the China narrative to strengthen their case against marijuana reform. In July, Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM) released an advertisement suggesting that President Donald Trump’s pending cannabis rescheduling proposal could empower Chinese cartels. By linking legalization or rescheduling efforts to foreign criminal threats, these groups aim to undermine the momentum of cannabis reform advocates.

The use of foreign influence as a political talking point is not new. In 2023, a major marijuana lobbying firm was forced to apologize after sending a letter to Senate leadership that referenced Chinese investments in cannabis as part of a push to expand a bipartisan banking bill. The incident highlighted the sensitivity of invoking China in cannabis policy debates.

Timing Amid Federal Marijuana Policy Crossroads

The decision to hold this hearing comes at a critical juncture in national marijuana policy. The Biden administration’s proposal to move cannabis from Schedule I to Schedule III under the Controlled Substances Act remains pending, with reform advocates pressing for swift action. Such a shift would recognize cannabis as having medical value and significantly ease restrictions on research and prescribing.

At the same time, congressional Republicans have introduced measures to block rescheduling altogether. On Wednesday, the House Appropriations Committee advanced a spending bill that would bar the Justice Department from implementing a rescheduling decision. Meanwhile, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee approved a separate bill aimed at repealing Washington, D.C.’s expansion of marijuana possession expungements.

These moves underscore how marijuana policy has become deeply entangled in partisan disputes, with Republicans often framing reform efforts as security risks rather than public health or criminal justice matters.

Potential Implications of the Hearing

While the upcoming hearing may not yield immediate legislative changes, it could influence how the public and policymakers view cannabis reform in the months ahead. By framing illicit marijuana grows as a vector for Chinese criminal influence, lawmakers may seek to sway undecided colleagues or bolster opposition to federal rescheduling.

It may also set the stage for broader hearings or investigations into foreign influence in U.S. industries beyond cannabis, especially as tensions with China remain a defining feature of American foreign policy.

The rhetoric surrounding the hearing—particularly its “invasion” framing—suggests that Republicans intend to use the issue to highlight both border security concerns and opposition to cannabis reform. Whether this

resonates with the broader public or comes across as political theater will likely depend on the evidence and testimony presented during the session.

As the September 18 hearing approaches, marijuana reform advocates, prohibitionist organizations, and policymakers alike are closely watching how the discussion will unfold. With federal cannabis rescheduling hanging in the balance, the intersection of national security narratives and drug policy reform could play an outsized role in shaping the next phase of the debate.

Email: info@cannabisriskmanager.com | Phone: +415-226-4060

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