http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/marijuana-hemp-dairy-farmers-wi-s5.jpg



Sen. Jeff Smith writes about Governor Evers' budget proposal to legalize marijuana in Wisconsin, sharing information about the positive impact it could have on the state's economy and agricultural industry.

MADISON - Governor Evers' 2021-23 budget will enable Wisconsinites to bounce back from the pandemic stronger than ever. His budget includes initiatives, like marijuana legalization, that will get our economy back on track and create new opportunities for our rural communities.

My colleague, Senator Agard (D – Madison) often says the most dangerous thing about marijuana is that it's illegal. I agree; marijuana prohibition does more harm than good. Marijuana legalization will create a safe product for consumers, while opening doors for farmers and entrepreneurs to get involved in a controlled market.

Wisconsin is already lagging behind other states –even our own neighboring states–to legalize medical and recreational marijuana. Thirty-six states already legalized medical marijuana. Fifteen states, including Michigan and Illinois, already legalized recreational marijuana for adults. Minnesota's top lawmakers and Governor are pushing for legalization too.

Wisconsin should take advantage of the same opportunities our neighbors have by legalizing marijuana. In doing so, we can plant the seeds, so our state can grow to be more equitable and

successful. Marijuana legalization will deliver a better future for Wisconsin.

Marijuana legalization would have a positive impact on Wisconsin's economy and help us recover from COVID-19. Governor Evers' budget taxes marijuana similar to the way alcohol is taxed. This policy would create new business opportunities and generate an estimated $165 million in revenue. Almost $80 million from marijuana sales would be reinvested throughout the state through the Community Reinvestment Fund. The Fund would even direct $34 million to sparsity aid to support our small, rural schools.



Marijuana could be a boon to Wisconsin's agriculture industry. Our greatest weakness in agriculture is the average age of farmers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average age of farmers nationally is 57.5. Young people are saddled with student loan debt, they need broadband to stay connected and raise their families and land prices are through the roof. It's hard for our kids and grandkids to even consider farming without offering some hope to make a living.

Marijuana legalization offers hope to a beleaguered group of youngsters who want to come home to run the family farm. According to the U.S. Agriculture Census, a small but significant rise in young farmers preceded the 2018 Hemp Bill passage. Young farmers are cultivating hemp and can cultivate marijuana while also milking cows, baling hay or fixing up those old barns throughout the countryside. We need new farmers and marijuana could draw them in.

Our neighboring states are generating new income for farmers. In 2020, Illinois sold $1 billion worth of marijuana and Michigan sold $440 million. Wisconsin farmers can grow high-quality

safe products for consumers while accessing a new market of opportunity.

Marijuana legalization has broad support across the state. According to a Marquette Law School Poll done in 2019, 60% of Wisconsinites support marijuana legalization. When it comes to medical marijuana legalization, an overwhelming 83% of Wisconsinites are supportive.

Medical marijuana legalization will ensure there is a safe product available for individuals with chronic pain or other illness. Medical marijuana has shown promising results to manage a variety of debilitating symptoms for diseases, such as Parkinson's, epilepsy, Crohn's or cancer. Medical marijuana is considered a great alternative for opiates. In fact, studies have indicated that states that legalized medical marijuana have seen a reduction in opioid-related deaths.



I've never had the desire to use marijuana, but I do recognize how it has been vilified for decades, often considered more dangerous than alcohol. Like alcohol prohibition, laws against marijuana possession have led to an overburdened justice system and unregulated market.

There's much to be said about the ethics of marijuana legalization. Medical marijuana seems like an easy choice to ease others' suffering. It's almost certainly safer to regulate the manufacture, distribution and sale of recreational marijuana, than the unknown origins of what many are using now.

Times and attitudes are changing. But still, the most dangerous thing about marijuana right now is that it's illegal. Wisconsin needs to catch up to our neighboring states and create a safe market for marijuana. This plan makes sense – it's about time Wisconsin acts on it.