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Health is top priority in new marijuana legislation: Minister

If your objectives are to protect public health and safety, keep marijuana out of the hands of minors and cut illegal profits flowing to organized crime?then the law as it stands today has been an abject failure.

Law enforcement agencies in Canada spend an estimated $2-3 billion a year trying to fight pot, yet Canadian teenagers are among the heaviest users in the western world. And criminals walk away with $7-8 billion every year in illicit proceeds. We have to do better.

From the very beginning, health and safety objectives have been in the forefront of our approach to cannabis. The new legislation we introduced last week reflects that?to do a better job of protecting our kids and fighting crime.

We have benefited from the thorough, balanced and thoughtful advice of an Expert Task Force which gathered the best available data, medical and legal input, the experiences of other jurisdictions around the world and the views of a vast array of Canadians. Our proposals are in line with their recommendations.

The new law would create a strong framework for legalizing, strictly regulating and restricting the use of cannabis:

? Only adults (18 years of age and older) will have legal access to the product through an appropriate retail framework, and sourced from a safe and well-regulated industry, or grown in small amounts at home (i.e., a maximum of four plants in any one residence)

? Provinces will be able to set a higher minimum age or a lower home limit, if they deem that appropriate.

? It will be legal for adults to possess, use and share (with other adults) up to 30 grams in public.

? Municipalities will be able to enact local bylaws reflecting community preferences (e.g., where cannabis is produced or consumed)

? Serious criminal penalties will apply to all those operating outside this framework.

? For a young person (under 18), it will be an offence to possess, use or share marijuana. Prosecutions will be governed by the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Criminal charges will not be laid where the amount involved is under 5 grams, but provinces could create ?ticketable? offences to deal with such small amounts

? Promotion, packaging, labelling and display will be tightly controlled to ensure factual accuracy and prevent appeals to young people

In tandem with Canada's new legal framework for cannabis, the government is also renovating the law dealing with impaired driving of all kinds.

Beyond a vigorous effort to raise public awareness about the deadliness of such reckless conduct, we are providing law enforcement agencies with clearer laws, better technologies (including new roadside oral testing devices), stronger and more expeditious procedures (including better access to blood tests), more training and other resources, and tougher penalties to deal appropriately with offenders?and to keep Canada's roadways and communities safe.

We believe our proposals represent the best approach to promote health and safety, protect our kids and combat crime. But they also represent very big change.

Something this large and transformational needs to be managed with care. In the meantime, the existing law (as deficient as it has been) needs to be respected. This is not a free-for-all.

Ralph Goodale
Minister of Public Safety