

Canada is now the largest country with legal marijuana marketplace

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**The Justin Trudeau government has spent two years working to make to make recreational marijuana legal.
(AP Photo/Peter Morgan, File)**

Seattle: Canada is now the largest country with a legal national marijuana marketplace as sales began early Wednesday in Newfoundland.

And there was more good news for pot aficionados: Hours before a handful of retail outlets opened in the country's easternmost province a federal official told The Associated Press that Canada will pardon all those with convictions for possessing up to 30 grams of marijuana, the now-legal threshold.

A formal announcement was planned for later Wednesday. The official, who was not authorized to speak public ahead of the announcement, said those who want to take advantage of the pardons will have to apply.

Canada has had legal medical marijuana since 2001 and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has spent two years working toward expanding that to include so-called recreational marijuana. The goal is to better reflect society's changing opinion about marijuana and bring black market operators into a regulated system.

Uruguay was first was the first country to legalize marijuana.

Tom Clarke, an illegal pot dealer for three decades, was among the first to make a legal sale in Canada when his store opened at midnight local time in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. He made his first sale to his dad and a lineup of about 50 to 100 people waited outside his shop.

"This is awesome. I've been waiting my whole life for this. I served my dad," Clarke said. "I am so happy to be living in Canada right now instead of south of the border."

Clarke, whose middle name is Herb, has been called THC for years by his friends. His dad, Don, said he was thrilled he was among the first customers of legal pot.

"It's been a long time coming. We've only been discussing this for 50 years. It's better late than never," he said.

In nearby St. John's, Newfoundland, hundreds of customers were lined up around the block at the private store on Water Street, the main commercial drag in the provincial capital, by the time the clock struck midnight. A festive atmosphere broke out, with some customers lighting up on the sidewalk and motorists honking their horns in support as they drove by the crowd.

Ian Power, who was first in line, said he plans to frame his purchase.

The stores are among at least 111 legal pot shops expected to open across the nation of 37 million people on Wednesday, with many more to come, according to an Associated Press survey of the provinces.

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Alberta and Quebec have set the minimum age for purchase at 18, while others have made it 19.

No stores will open in Ontario, which includes Toronto. The most populous province is working on its regulations and doesn't expect stores until next spring.

Ryan Bose, 48, a Lyft driver in Toronto, said it's about time.

"Alcohol took my grandfather and it took his youngest son, and weed has taken no one from me ever," he said.

A patchwork of regulations has spread in Canada as each province takes its own approach within the framework set out by the federal government. Some are operating government-run stores, some are allowing private retailers, some both.

Canada's national approach has allowed for unfettered industry banking, inter-province shipments of cannabis and billions of dollars in investment - a sharp contrast with national prohibition in the United States.

Nine U.S. states have legalized recreational use of pot, and more than 30 have approved medical marijuana. California, the largest legal market in the U.S., earlier this month became the first state with a law mandating expungement of criminal convictions for marijuana-related offenses that no are longer illegal.

Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon said it's time for the U.S. government to follow Canada's lead.

"Now that our neighbor to the north is opening its legal cannabis market, the longer we delay, the longer we miss out on potentially significant economic opportunities for Oregon and other states across the country," he said in a statement.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection invited Canadian media to a conference call on Tuesday so officials could reiterate that marijuana remains illegal under U.S. federal law and that those who are caught at the border with pot are subject to arrest and prosecution.

As Canada welcomes legalization, supply shortages could develop, as happened in some U.S. states when legalization arrived.

Trevor Fencott, chief executive of Fire and Flower, said his company has 15 Alberta stores staffed and ready to sell marijuana, but the province has supplied only enough product to open three of them Wednesday.

"We're aware of some of the kinks or growing pains that come with creating an industry out of whole cloth in 24 months," Fencott said.

Brenda Tobin and her son Trevor plan to open their pot shop in Labrador City in Newfoundland and Labrador at 4:20 p.m. Wednesday _ 420 is slang for the consumption of cannabis. Tobin, a longtime convenience store owner, said they will be cutting a ribbon and cake.

"We are just ecstatic," she said.

She doesn't expect to make much money off the pot itself, noting Newfoundland's 8 percent cap on retail pot

profits. She hopes to make money from pipes, bongs and marijuana paraphernalia.

“There’s no money in the product itself,” she said. “You got to sell \$250,000 worth of product in order to make \$20,000. That’s not even paying someone’s salary.”

- AP