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Where Marijuana Is a Point of Pride

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

NEDERLAND, Colo. — Millions of Americans expressed their feelings about [marijuana](#) last week. In Colorado, 24 communities voted to ban or restrict shops selling legal medical marijuana. In California, voters wrestled with the question of legalization for recreational use — with issues of health, crime and taxes all coming into play — then voted no.

But here in Nederland, it was just another beautiful day high in the mountains.

Marijuana has been mainstream in this outpost of the counterculture, 8,000 feet in the Rockies and an hour northwest of Denver, since the days of [Bob Marley's](#) cigar-size “spliffs” and the jokes of Cheech and Chong.

And to judge by the numbers, things have not changed all that much.

An explosion of medical marijuana sales over the last year in Colorado as well as the District of Columbia and the 13 other states where medical use is allowed has certainly brought a new element into the mix. Dispensaries like Grateful Meds, one of seven medical marijuana providers in Nederland, population 1,400, now have legal compliance lawyers on retainer and sales tax receipts in the cash drawer.

But marijuana is still marijuana, and Nederland's perch overlooking what John Denver immortalized as “the Colorado Rocky Mountain high” has not budged.

State records show that by some coincidence, the concentration of medical marijuana patients and dispensaries selling medicinal cannabis is higher here in Colorado's old hippie heartland than in any other corner of the state.

In Gilpin County, for example, which begins at Nederland's doorstep, almost one in 20 residents qualify for cannabis treatment — the highest level in Colorado and more than three times the statewide average. State law, passed by voter referendum in 2000, allows marijuana treatment for a list of maladies, from [cancer](#) to chronic pain, if a doctor verifies the need.

And doctors have obliged. The sick-enough-for-marijuana pattern extends in a broad band from Nederland west through an archipelago of communities that were equally tinctured by tie-dye a generation ago and are now cornerstones of the state's resort and tourism industry.

Summit and Pitkin Counties, home to ski towns like Breckenridge, Keystone and Aspen, pride themselves on a healthy outdoor youth culture, but they also have a disproportionate amount of debilitating pain diagnosed in men in their 20s, state records show.

"Who would think there would be such severe pain among young men in Colorado?" said Ron Hyman, the state registrar of vital statistics and director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's medical marijuana program.

Nederland residents like Hal Mobley, 56, who was on his way to get a haircut on a recent morning, asked pretty much the same thing. Marijuana is part of the life here, he said — no more available, no less, and no different in its use, he thinks, than it has been for decades.

"It's for pain?" he said, squinting into the bright sun.

Well, it is also good medicine for the Nederland town budget. Tax revenues are way up, in ways that would make many a more buttoned-down town treasurer envious — partly from more tourists spending money in the restaurants and shops, but even more so from marijuana sales.

In June alone, while many communities around the nation were still sputtering through economic doldrums, sales taxes collected in Nederland came in a robust 54 percent above those of June 2009. Without the tax collected on marijuana, the increase would have been 22 percent.

"It's been here, probably in an illegal capacity, for a long time, but now there's an opportunity for industry," said Nederland's mayor, Sumaya Abu-Haidar. "There's an opportunity for free enterprise, an opportunity for people to make a living in a way that wasn't available before."

Philip Dyer, 45, a local musician, put it another way. The government, he said, "has finally gotten smart enough to regulate it and get their piece."

Supporters of medical marijuana say the pattern — medical use most predominant in places of historically high recreational use — is simply a reflection of better knowledge about the drug and its properties. People in communities where marijuana has been accepted, they say, know more about its medical benefits than those in other parts of the state where medical marijuana patients are rare.

Still, residents here say that despite a kind of marijuana status quo on paper, things are changing.

A demographic shift in recent years, with more families, professionals, tech workers and telecommuters moving here, has created tensions, town officials say, over questions of growth, development, tourism — and marijuana, with many of the newcomers less enthusiastic than the old guard about Nederland's ganja-tinged reputation.

Earlier this year, Nederland became the third community in Colorado to decriminalize recreational marijuana use. But the vote, mostly symbolic because recreational use is still illegal under state and federal law, deeply divided the community. Legalization passed, but by only 41 of the 477 votes cast. A proposal to hold a cannabis festival in town hit a bigger wall of opposition and was voted down.

"When people think of Nederland as this stoner town, if you will, that is not accurate," Mayor Abu-Haidar said.

But the town still has a reputation for having good marijuana, a point of pride that the legal compliance lawyer for Grateful Meds, Susan Eisman, was happy to talk about during a tour of the shop. Whereas many dispensaries have perhaps five strains of marijuana to choose from, Grateful Meds has 30, and serves about 300 patients.

"We have patients coming from all over Colorado," Ms. Eisman said. "And a lot of it is the quality and quantity and the selection and the reputation.

"A patient just the other day came all the way from Longmont, an hour away, because he liked a particular strain and he can't get it anywhere else."