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### Justice Department Announces Update to Marijuana Enforcement Policy

Today, the U.S. Department of Justice announced an update to its federal marijuana enforcement policy in light of recent state ballot initiatives that legalize, under state law, the possession of small amounts of marijuana and provide for the regulation of marijuana production, processing, and sale.

In a new memorandum outlining the policy, the Department makes clear that marijuana remains an illegal drug under the Controlled Substances Act and that federal prosecutors will continue to aggressively enforce this statute. To this end, the Department identifies eight (8) enforcement areas that federal prosecutors should prioritize. These are the same enforcement priorities that have traditionally driven the Department's efforts in this area.

Outside of these enforcement priorities, however, the federal government has traditionally relied on state and local authorities to address marijuana activity through enforcement of their own narcotics laws. This guidance continues that policy.

For states such as Colorado and Washington that have enacted laws to authorize the production, distribution and possession of marijuana, the Department expects these states to establish strict regulatory schemes that protect the eight federal interests identified in the Department's guidance. These schemes must be tough in practice, not just on paper, and include strong, state-based enforcement efforts, backed by adequate funding. Based on assurances that those states will impose an appropriately strict regulatory system, the Department has informed the governors of both states that it is deferring its right to challenge their legalization laws at this time. But if any of the stated harms do materialize—either despite a strict regulatory scheme or because of the lack of one—federal prosecutors will act aggressively to bring individual prosecutions focused on federal enforcement priorities and the Department may challenge the regulatory scheme themselves in these states.

A copy of the memorandum, sent to all United States Attorneys by Deputy Attorney General James M. Cole, is available below.