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Ottawa sticking to July 2018 deadline to legalize pot

The federal government is staying firm on its plan to legalize marijuana by next summer, even if it has to “backstop” provinces that aren’t ready to distribute cannabis or tax it.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made it clear on Monday that the government is sticking to its July 2018 deadline for the legalization of marijuana. (SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By **BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH** Ottawa Bureau

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OTTAWA—The federal government is staying firm on its plan to legalize marijuana by next summer, even if it has to “backstop” provinces that aren’t ready to distribute cannabis or tax it.

Worries about the readiness for legalization were aired Monday when a meeting of federal and provincial finance ministers ended with no clear agreement on a coordinated strategy to tax cannabis or even on the principles to guide how it should be taxed.

Indeed, behind the scenes several provinces appealed to Ottawa to delay legalization to provide more time to prepare the myriad law enforcement and health moves required by the change.

But Ottawa won’t budge on its deadline to legalize marijuana by July 2018, a fact Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made clear Monday.

“We gave everyone lots of time,” Trudeau said on Parliament Hill. “We’ve been working for a long time with all the provinces, with municipalities . . . It is time to move on.”

Federal Finance Minister Bill Morneau says the approaching deadline to legalization should spur the work necessary to make it a reality.

“We know that to get things done, we need to set a timeline. That’s exactly what we’ve done,” Morneau told reporters after the meeting.

But after a day of meeting with no agreement on the issue — an agenda that also included topics such as the state of the Canadian economy and Canada-U.S. relations — he conceded that work lies ahead.

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“Every province was not ready yet to get to a conclusion, even on principles, just because we’re at different states of review of this issue,” he said.

Morneau said tax rates on cannabis should be kept low to avoid encouraging pot users from seeking out cheaper, illicit producers. He said the federal finance department has started to do some modelling around possible tax rates and the price levels that would deter the black market for cannabis. “What’s the taxation level that actually has that impact? We didn’t get to a conclusion on rates today,” Morneau said.

The finance ministers tossed around some numbers for tax rates at their Monday meeting, but Morneau said the talk didn’t touch on revenue estimates. “What we did talk about was the fact that revenues shouldn’t be our driving goal,” he said.

But Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa says that provinces want to ensure the tax revenue on cannabis covers the “substantive” costs they will face in ensuring necessary law enforcement and public health and education initiatives are in place for legalization. And he wants to ensure that the provinces are able to recoup the costs of distribution too.

“We have yet to flesh that out, but it’s certainly something we want to make certain is accommodated as we proceed,” Sousa said in an interview after the meeting.

Sousa said Ontario will be ready to meet Ottawa’s deadline. “Will the rest of Canada be at that point? I don’t know,” he said.

Morneau conceded that is a question mark as well. But he was firm that cannabis will be legal by next summer, even if Ottawa has to backstop provinces that aren’t ready with their own distribution networks by providing, for example, mail-order delivery of legalized cannabis.

“We have an agenda, we have a timeline and we have a backup plan,” he said.

The federal task force on cannabis legalization last November recommended that taxes be set “high enough to limit the growth of consumption, but low enough to compete effectively with the illicit market.”

The task force also recommended that the tax scheme should be designed to discourage purchase of high-potency products. Morneau said that concept was not discussed Monday.

“We yet haven’t got to conclusions on how exactly cannabis should be taxed, whether it’s on volume or potency. But we will need to be practical as we get to those conclusions to ensure that we have a regime that works,” he

said.

He said he intends to meet with his provincial counterparts again in December when “we hope to have made significant progress.”

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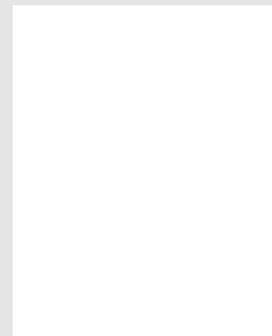
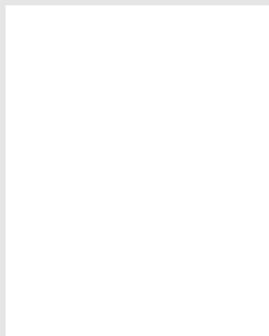
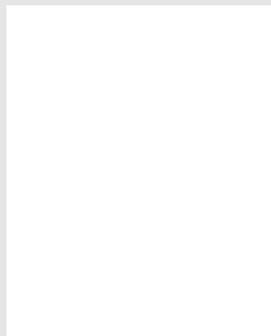
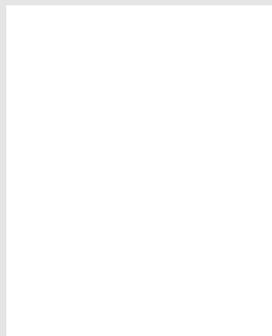
CANADA

Float in Montreal Fête nationale parade sparks outrage

Clip viewed more than 200,000 times on Facebook shows four Black men pushing a float by hand, followed by an all-white



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