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Marijuana Research Growers Receive U.S. Approval

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. government has approved new growers of research marijuana for the first time in more than 50 years, people involved in the process said, widening the capacity to study the drug’s medical value.

The action by the Drug Enforcement Administration after years of delay means researchers will be able to study marijuana from more than one grower, a farm at the University of Mississippi, which the government approved in 1968 as the only legal source of pot for federal research. Researchers have long argued that they need to study a wider variety of the plant to know if it can be effective in alleviating pain, fighting seizures, combating depression and relieving post-traumatic stress.

“This is a monumental step,” said George Hodgkin, a former Navy SEAL who has been waiting more than two years for his business, Biopharmaceutical Research Co. in Monterey, Calif., to receive permission to conduct studies. “This type of long-term thinking from the government will allow companies like ours to pioneer a federally legal cannabis market for products that are tested and approved to help the public.”

Steven Groff, a physician in York, Pa., said he intends to study whether cannabis can be used to kill bacteria and viruses such as drug-resistant staph infections. DEA officials contacted him Friday to let him know he had been selected.

“We will be growing research cannabis to sell to the whole world for the first time,” said Dr. Groff, who has an 80,000-square-foot growing facility. “I know the power of this plant, but we need to find some data to back it up. That’s what’s been missing.”

Both Dr. Groff and Mr. Hodgkin said they planned to agree quickly to a list of regulations that would allow their licenses to be granted. The DEA had no immediate comment.

The DEA under President Barack Obama began seeking applications for additional marijuana growers in August 2016. The agency at the time said it was complying with federal law in its push to expand the study of pot.

Marijuana for medical use is currently legal in 36 states, and 17 allow recreational use by adults. While the Food and Drug Administration has approved some prescription drugs derived from marijuana, the use and possession of cannabis remains federally prohibited.

The White House has said President Biden supports decriminalizing the drug but believes legalization should be left to the states. Attorney General Merrick Garland has told lawmakers that he doesn’t view federal marijuana prosecutions as the best use of the Justice Department’s limited resources.

Dozens of applicants, including Mr. Hodgin, other entrepreneurs and a university professor, submitted requests to cultivate marijuana for research after the DEA's 2016 request. Their applications went unanswered under the Trump administration.

Justice Department officials including then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a longtime opponent of marijuana use, concluded that the DEA's program violated a 1961 United Nations treaty that aimed to curb drug trafficking, prompting the agency to re-examine its rules.

Mr. Hodgin, who wants to study how marijuana might help veterans suffering from chronic pain and post-traumatic stress, said he hired a team, invested millions of dollars and created a production facility that has sat empty. The DEA issued new rules in December that it said were consistent with the treaty and began processing applications for new growers.

The licensees will be subject to regulations aimed at preventing their supply from entering the general marketplace.