

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VI Not Likely To Follow Suit In Legalizing Medical Marijuana By Executive Order

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ST. THOMAS – If Gov. Kenneth Mapp's words from last month are still valid, it is not likely that the Virgin Islands will follow suit and legalize medical marijuana by executive order. On The Reef 1620 AM Mapp said he will deal with the issue if it comes up in a bill from the Legislature.

"I do not believe the Virgin Islands is ready to go to wholesale legalization of marijuana," Mapp said. "I agreed and have no issue with regard to the decriminalization of small amounts of marijuana. I hear the conversation and the discussion and the debate about medicinal use of marijuana, but I'm not quite sure what we call medicinal use. If I say that I'm anxious and nervous if I don't have marijuana does the doctor give me a prescription

because calms my nerves and I can focus more? So I don't know those issues to that extent."

Puerto Rico's governor on Sunday signed an executive order to authorize the use of medical marijuana in the U.S. territory in an unexpected move following a lengthy public debate, according to the Associated Press.

Gov. Alejandro Garcia Padilla said the island's health secretary has three months to issue a report detailing how the executive order will be implemented, the impact it will have and what future steps could be taken. The order went into immediate effect.

"We're taking a significant step in the area of health that is fundamental to our development and quality of life," Garcia said in a statement. "I am sure that many patients will receive appropriate treatment that will offer them new hope."

In his comments last month, Mapp made it clear that he had "no real strong" feelings on the issue of medical marijuana.

"I have no real strong feelings on it one way or the other," Mapp said. "I've seen it from the perspective of a police officer, and I've seen it in the context of being on the public stage as an administrator. And as I said, the decriminalization I think was on point and needed to happen. But I'm not quite sure how fast and how far we travel towards the ebb of legalization."

The Puerto Rican governor's executive order directs the health department to authorize the use of some or all controlled substances or derivatives of the cannabis plant for medical use.

Garcia said the government also will soon outline the specific authorized uses of marijuana and its derivatives for medical purposes. He noted that medical marijuana is used in the U.S. mainland and elsewhere to treat pain associated with migraines and illnesses including epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and AIDS.

The Virgin Islands governor said he expected the Senate to take action on the medical marijuana issue.

"To be quite candid I don't know what my feelings are," Mapp said about medical marijuana. "That's going to come up through the Legislature and I guess we're going to figure it out and decide on it."

Medical marijuana is already legal in 23 U.S. states, and a group of U.S. legislators is seeking to remove federal prohibitions on it. Elsewhere in the Caribbean, Jamaica recently passed a law that partially decriminalized small amounts of pot and paved the way for a lawful medical marijuana sector.

Mapp said he knows that the issue has gained traction on the mainland, but wasn't sure how it would work in the territory.

"I know a number of states have legalized it or decriminalized it and there have been expanded uses of it," Mapp said. "There's been other issues that have occurred as a result of that, but the nation as a whole is walking towards the banner of legalization and

where the Virgin Islands fall in that travel or that route, I guess that's what we all have to decide and figure out in the continued discussion in the community.

Jaime Perello, president of Puerto Rico's House of Representatives, said he supported Garcia's order.

"It's a step in the right direction," he said. "One of the benefits that patients say they receive the most is pain relief."

Opposition legislator Jenniffer Gonzalez said Garcia's actions leave the law of controlled substances in what she called a "judicial limbo."

Back in 2013, Puerto Rico legislators debated a bill that would allow people to use marijuana for medicinal purposes, but a final vote was never taken.

Amado Martinez, an activist who supports legalizing marijuana for all uses, said in a phone interview that he was very surprised by the governor's actions.

He wondered what type of illnesses would receive authorization for medical marijuana, and whether the medical marijuana will be imported or if people can obtain licenses to grow it on the island.

"There are so many questions. We have to look at all those details," he said.