

Legal pot use draws a crowd

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A group of about 60 medical marijuana advocates gathered at a farmhouse in rural Winton on Sunday for a rally they dubbed "Weedfest."

The goal of the event, the organizers said, was to promote support for the legalization of marijuana.

"It is not a dangerous drug," said Judge James Gray, a Libertarian and Newport Beach Superior Court judge who is running for the U.S. Senate. "It is made dangerous when it is made illegal. Marijuana should be treated basically like alcohol."

Gray said his candidacy will focus on two issues: repealing the "excesses of the Patriot Act" and the legalization of marijuana.

"If the Founding Fathers were here today, they'd take up arms against what's happening to our country," he said. "We are giving away our civil liberties, and we should be ashamed of ourselves. How we can look our grandchildren in the eyes is beyond me."

The event was held in the back yard of a small, white farmhouse surrounded by strawberry fields. One of the organizers, Dustin Costa, used to live in the house, and grew medical marijuana there.

But in February, Costa said, police raided the house, confiscating 900 marijuana plants. He has since had to sell the property to pay his legal fees. The makeshift greenhouse where he used to grow marijuana is empty.

"I'm broke now," he said. "But I'm not giving up the war."

While Gray said he has never smoked marijuana, many people at Weedfest said they must smoke it daily to deal with painful medical ailments.

But in doing so, they said, they are constantly harassed by police.

Seth McLean, 19, from Sacramento, said he suffers from Crohn's disease, which causes inflammation in the intestines. At a recent rally in Sacramento, he said, police threatened to jail him for smoking.



U.S. Senate candidate and Orange County Superior Court Judge Jim Gray talks to a medical marijuana advocate group. The gathering, dubbed 'Weedstock,' was at a private residence near Winton on Sunday.

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Above, a smoker listens to Gray speak.

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"All I was doing was what a sick person must do to be there," he said. "I could not attend the rally without being medicated."

Jean Cowsert has had bouts with cancer and fibromyalgia -- a chronic musculoskeletal syndrome with symptoms similar to those of chronic fatigue syndrome.

Cowsert said that five years ago she and her husband were charged with felony possession after police raided their home in Galt.

"It was nasty, it was ugly, it was devastating," she said. "Suicide is something that comes to your mind a lot when you go through something like that."

Medical marijuana users lack legal protection, said attorney Richard Runcie of Fresno, because no civil case has set a precedent.

Runcie laid out the ideal plaintiff for such a case: An elderly lady with a chronic disease. She grows medical marijuana, but not a lot, "say 10 to 20 plants." She gets arrested, the police refuse to give back her marijuana, and she is made to suffer.

"Then we'd have a civil rights case," he said. "That would start backing off the police."

Another attorney in attendance, Dennis Roberts of Oakland, compared the medical marijuana movement to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

"It's the same thing," Roberts said. "You have a bunch of people who are isolated but are working on the same issues. Now we've just got to bring everyone together and start the movement."

The movement will continue in two weeks, said Costa, when a second Weedfest is held in Bakersfield.

And it will culminate in November, advocates said they hope, with the election of Gray to the Senate.

"If I am elected, this shooting match is over," Gray told the group. "It will be historic."

In the crowd, Laura McKenzie, a sufferer of depression and arthritis, listened to Gray's speech. McKenzie, who drove down from Redding to attend Weedfest, said she had never heard of Gray before this event, but that she'll vote for him now.

And she echoed the sentiment of many people at Weedfest when she said, "I hope he's electable."

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