

# Coalition of Racial Justice & Grower Advocates Strongly Oppose S.54

## *Call for more equitable and thoughtful cannabis legislation for Vermont*

**Vermont, Statewide** — A coalition of nonprofit organizations and businesses from across Vermont have come together to oppose S.54, the cannabis legislation being considered by the Vermont legislature. The coalition—consisting of the Northeast Organic Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), Rural Vermont, the Vermont Growers Association (VGA), Justice for All, and Trace—calls on Vermont’s legislature to reject S.54 and commit to working with interested organizations, communities of color, and small farms and businesses across Vermont to develop legislation creating a tax and regulatory system in the state which sets a new standard for equity, reparations, inclusivity and representation.

S.54 is a bill currently in the Vermont legislature that would set up a system for taxation, regulation, and retail sales of cannabis, following the state's legalization of cannabis possession in 2018. Different versions of S.54 have passed both the House and Senate, and the bill is now in the hands of a conference committee made up of three members each chamber. As lawmakers prepare to return for a short, budget-focused legislative session later this month, a small number of well-funded, highly vested interests are working to convince lawmakers that passing S.54 should be a priority.

“S.54 fails to earn the support of Vermont’s cannabis community,” says VGA’s Geoffrey Pizzutillo. “As the formal tax and regulate cannabis organization in Vermont, our members are the local families and small businesses that will compose the state's legal marketplace. This legislation leaves them out.”

“It is critical that we not allow this global medical and economic crisis to serve as justification for supporting a fundamentally inadequate and inequitable bill which will further amplify existing racial, economic, and social inequities in Vermont”, says Rural Vermont’s Policy Director, Graham Unangst-Rufenacht. “We have the opportunity now to reject S.54 and to commit to engaging with a diversity of stakeholders to create a legal cannabis market in Vermont which is founded in racial justice, and agricultural and economic equity and opportunity. We are being asked to support S.54 based on the potential revenue this new market could bring to Vermont. We must in turn ask: "who will have access to, and agency and privileges within, this market? Who will share in and benefit from the revenues? Who were the stakeholders in determining this?"

The devastation inflicted by the war on drugs, and the criminalization of cannabis, has disproportionately affected communities of color, including here in Vermont. Its impacts have shattered the lives of individuals, families, and communities for generations and across generations. These impacts are long-lasting, complex, and both explicit and implicit including mental and physical health, socio-economic opportunity and positionality, incarceration, police and criminal justice system violence, housing, education, and more.

“This bill fails to adequately address the magnitude of the damage or offer any real equitable opportunity for black folks to thrive in this industry,” says Mark Hughes of Justice for All.

“Taxation and regulation of cannabis must be directly linked to addressing the harm caused by the ‘War on Drugs’ and ensuring those impacted have opportunities to thrive.”

The war on drugs is also to be acknowledged as only one of many tools of systemic racism employed amidst the broader history and impacts of institutional racism and xenophobia which has resulted in the dramatic disparities of business ownership, land access and ownership, access to capital, and more which are present in our communities.

The decriminalization of cannabis, and the establishment of legal markets in various states, has thus far resulted in few outcomes which begin to address and redress this history; rather resulting in the furthering of systemic white supremacy, racism, and economic inequity in the cannabis industry. The legal cannabis market is estimated to become a \$40 billion industry by the end of 2020, yet black-owned cannabis businesses only represent 4.3% of total market share. S.54 is a continuation of that policy which we find unacceptable for Vermont.

More information about this issue can be found here:

<https://www.ruralvermont.org/action-alerts-1/2020/8/13/no-taxation-and-regulation-without-reparations-say-no-to-s54>

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**About Rural Vermont:** *Rural Vermont was founded in 1985 and its mission is to lead the resurgence of community-scale agriculture through education, advocacy, and organizing in support of Vermonters living in deep connection to one another and to the land which nourishes us all.*