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Marijuana Not High Obama Priority



President Barack Obama participates in an interview with ABC's Barbara Walters in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, Dec. 11, 2012. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza) AUTO START: ON OFF



By **DEVIN DWYER (@devindwyer)**
WASHINGTON, Dec. 14, 2012

President Obama says recreational users of **marijuana** in states that have legalized the substance should not be a "top priority" of federal law enforcement officials prosecuting the war on drugs.

"We've got bigger fish to fry," Obama said of pot users in Colorado and Washington during an **exclusive interview** with ABC News' Barbara Walters.

"It would not make sense for us to see a top priority as going after recreational users in states that have determined that it's legal," he said, invoking the same approach taken toward users of medicinal marijuana in 18 states where it's legal.

Obama's comments on marijuana are his first following Colorado and Washington voters' approval of Nov. 7 ballot measures that legalize the recreational use and sale of pot in defiance of federal law.

Marijuana, or cannabis, remains classified under the Controlled Substances Act as a Schedule I narcotic whose cultivation, distribution, possession and use are criminal acts. It's in the same category as heroin, LSD and "Ecstasy," all deemed to have high potential for abuse.

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Obama told Walters he does not – "at this point" – support widespread [legalization of marijuana](#). But he cited shifting public opinion and limited government resources as reasons to find a middle ground on punishing use of the drug.



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"This is a tough problem, because Congress has not yet changed the law," Obama said. "I head up the executive branch; we're supposed to be carrying out laws. And so what we're going to need to have is a conversation about, How do you reconcile a federal law that still says marijuana is a federal offense and state laws that say that it's legal?"



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The president said he has asked Attorney General Eric Holder and the Justice Department to examine the legal questions surrounding conflicting state and federal laws on drugs.



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"There are a number of issues that have to be considered, among them the impact that drug usage has on young people, [and] we have treaty obligations with nations outside the United States," Holder said Wednesday of the review underway.

As a politician, Obama has always opposed legalizing marijuana and downplayed his personal history with the substance.

Obama wrote in his 1995 memoir, "Dreams from My Father," that he would smoke pot regularly with his high school buddies who formed a "club of disaffection." The group was known as the "[Choom Gang](#)," says Obama biographer David Maraniss.

"There are a bunch of things I did that I regret when I was a kid," Obama told Walters. "My attitude is, substance abuse generally is not good for our kids, not good for our society.

"I want to discourage drug use," he added.

While the administration has not prioritized prosecutions of marijuana users and small-scale distributors in states where it's legal, it has not ceased prosecutions altogether. The Justice Department has continued raids on pot providers – including in states where they are legal – in an approach that experts say is more aggressive than Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush.

"I never made a commitment that somehow we were going to give carte blanche to large-scale producers and operators of marijuana – and the reason is, because it's against federal law," [Obama told "Rolling Stone"](#) in an interview earlier this year.

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