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Backers of pot legalization initiative launch first radio spot

The ad airing in the Bay Area and L.A. features a former L.A. County sheriff's deputy who says that the fight against the drug has led to drug cartels. An opponent calls the ad misleading.

By John Hoeffel

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The campaign to legalize marijuana in California kicked off this week, just days after the initiative made the ballot, with a radio ad saying many law enforcement professionals know marijuana laws have failed and calling the measure "a common sense solution."

The ad features Jeffrey Studdard, a former school district police officer and reserve L.A. County sheriff's deputy. Studdard says that he has "seen firsthand that the current approach on cannabis is simply not working," explaining that the fight against marijuana has led to "violent drug cartels" and "dealers in our schools and our streets" without reducing consumption.

He concludes by saying the Regulate, Control and Tax Cannabis Act, which would allow cities and counties to authorize pot sales and tax them, would raise billions and allow police to focus on violent crime.

Kim Raney, chief of the Covina Police Department and a spokesman for the California Police Chiefs Assn., called the ad "completely false and misleading."

He predicted that law enforcement groups would line up against the initiative. "This is really the first attempt to legalize drugs," he said. "This is just a Trojan horse. The first of an incremental strategic attempt."

Previewing the coming debate, he took issue with Studdard's contention that marijuana prohibition has spawned cartels and the implication that legalization would undercut them. "It's obviously naive to think that Mexican drug cartels and Asian drug cartels are not going to be involved, with all the money at stake," Raney said.

The spot, which lasts about a minute, will run for at least a week in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, but the campaign hopes to raise the money to keep it on the air and plans to add other radio and television spots featuring police officers, judges, doctors, teachers and parents. The commercial concludes by soliciting support.

Dale Sky Clare, a spokeswoman for the campaign, said, "The common theme has always been cops versus hippies, but the reality is that many law enforcement officers agree that prohibition has failed."

In the ad, Studdard says police officers support the measure, but campaign officials could name only two former officers in California, including Studdard, as well as a few former California prosecutors and judges. Studdard is identified in the ad as a former sheriff's deputy. He said he worked full-time for the Walnut Valley Unified School District and volunteered as a reserve deputy between 1990 and 2001.

Studdard, who taught drug education in the schools and made marijuana arrests, said he was severely disabled by a back injury in 2003 and tried pot.

He said it allowed him to give up painkillers, stimulated his appetite and changed his views on prohibition.

"It's not going to go away," he said. "It's been here for 7,000 years."