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US cracks down on fake pot as public health hazard

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US cracks down on fake pot as public health hazard

Associated Press | Posted: Wednesday, November 24, 2010 5:03 pm

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Buying this drug FILE - This Feb. 15, 2010, file photo shows a package of K2, a concoction of dried herbs sprayed with chemicals. Cracking down on fake pot, the government moved Wednesday to outlaw five chemicals used in herbal blends to make the synthetic marijuana sold in head shops and on the Internet to a growing number of teens and young adults. (AP Photo/Kelley McCall, File) Kelley McCall

Cracking down on fake pot, the government began emergency action Wednesday to outlaw five chemicals used in herbal blends to make synthetic marijuana. They're sold in drug paraphernalia shops and on the Internet to a burgeoning market of teens and young adults.

The Drug Enforcement Administration responded to the latest designer drug fad by launching a 30-day process to put these chemicals in the same drug category as heroin and cocaine. The agency acted after

receiving increasing numbers of bad reports _ including seizures, hallucinations and dependency _ from poison centers, hospitals and law enforcement, .

It was the fastest action the agency could take to get these products off the legal market. DEA spokeswoman Barbara Carreno said makers of fake pot blends like "Spice," "K2," "Blaze," and "Red X Dawn" label the mixtures as incense to try to hide their intended purpose.

Meantime, there were indications the producers were already moving to reformulate their products using chemicals not covered by the impending ban.

The fake pot _ smokeable plant leaves coated with chemicals _ has been the target of lawmakers and law enforcement around the country. At least 15 states have moved to regulate or ban one or more of the chemicals, as have some European and Scandinavian countries.

The man who created three of the chemicals as part of his government-sponsored research nearly 20 years ago said, "They are dangerous and anyone who uses them is stupid."

John W. Huffman, a retired organic chemistry researcher from Clemson University, said in a telephone interview from his Sylva, N.C., home, "They seem to be pretty toxic."

He said the reported medical problems have included overdoses, cases of addiction and even suicide.

As of Sept. 27, the American Association of Poison Control Centers had reported receiving more than 1,500 calls from 48 states and the District of Columbia about products spiked with these drugs, the Drug Enforcement Administration said.

The DEA first became aware of the new designer drugs in November 2008 when the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency analyzed "Spice." Sometimes the chemicals are produced abroad and shipped into the United States; earlier this year Customs seized a more than 110-pound load of two of the chemicals.

White House Drug Policy Director Gil Kerlikowske said that with youth drug use rising, "it is critical that parents act today to talk to young people about the harms of drug use, including synthetic marijuana products like Spice and K2 that are marketed as 'incense.'"

In a statement, Kerlikowske added, "Until the risks associated with ingesting these products and chemicals can be studied and understood, there is no place for them on the shelves of any legitimate business."

E-mail and telephone messages left for companies that manufacture and sell K2 and Red X Dawn were not immediately returned Wednesday.

Huffman said his research developed three compounds that mimic THC, the active ingredient in

marijuana, but have very different chemical formulas. The idea was to study how they interact with the brain, said Huffman, who added that they were tested only in animals.

It was unclear exactly how Huffman's research moved from the lab to the commercial market, but he said one chemical version was sold several years ago in South Korea as a growth supplement for bonsai plants. Also, several years ago he discussed his research in a chapter he contributed to a chemistry book.

"I suspect that the people who picked up on it were in China," Huffman said. "Most of these drugs ... originally started in Russia and Western Europe about 2005."

Carreno said DEA, the Health and Human Services Department and the Food and Drug Administration had been studying fake pot with an eye toward stiff regulation or a ban but "the review process was taking too long."

In the meantime, synthetic pot has been readily available on the Internet, at drug paraphernalia shops and even convenience stores for about \$10 to \$20 a gram.

And though the DEA action focuses on the five most commonly used fake pot chemicals it may not kill the industry.

Huffman said countless other compounds mimic THC, some hundreds of times more powerful than real marijuana.

DEA spokeswoman Dawn Dearden said law enforcement will use chemical tests to determine which products violate the ban and will focus on distributors, not individual users.

Mark Tucci, owner and CEO of Custom Blends Tobacco of Hilton Head, S.C., said he's already heard from suppliers who have promised new products with different chemicals that comply with the new regulations.

"We've been getting calls from manufacturers. They knew about this thing coming down, and they said they are working on other blends," said Tucci, whose company has four franchises and two company-owned stores, all in Pennsylvania, that sell K2.

Keith Stroup, legal counsel for NORML, a group that advocates legalizing marijuana, said he didn't think many people use the fake pot. "It doesn't matter from the standpoint of a marijuana smoker or marijuana legalization," Stroup said. "I have a feeling it's a fad that will be passed fairly quickly."

Grant Smith, a policy coordinator for the private Drug Policy Alliance, predicted the ban would just create a new black market.

"We know that marijuana prohibition has failed and there's a better way. We don't want to see the same

mistake happen again with K2 and Spice," Smith said.

For his part, Tucci said he's on board.

"I'm glad they're doing it because it gives clear guidance to retailers so we know what is legal and what is illegal," Tucci said. "If it's legal, I sell it; if it's illegal, we don't."

Associated Press writer Pete Yost contributed to this report.

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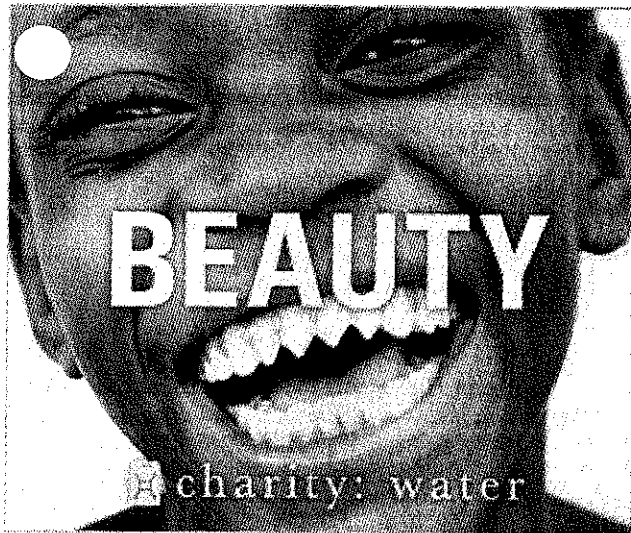
Posted in Government-and-politics on *Wednesday, November 24, 2010 5:03 pm* Updated: 8:04 pm.

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