

WORLD & NATION

"Stoner vote" dictates trade business of the Netherlands

BY ALEX LINDBERG
STAFF WRITER

Imagine you're sitting in a hazy coffee shop, hearing faint Jimi Hendrix songs as you puff on your pipe. Your eyes settle on canals and rows of buildings opposite the shop. A glance at the wall behind the counter reveals a poster with marijuana leaves and the word "Vote" in large print. This is a common scene for Amsterdam residents as shop owners persuade costumers to vote in the September general election.

As of Jan. 1, 2013, no non-Netherlands resident or anyone without an issued identification card, will be permitted to buy marijuana in the Netherlands. This ban on trade could push the Dutch economy into a sharp decline, given fewer tourists may visit and the main product they sell will remain on the shelves.

The last hope for the coffee shop business falls on the Sept. 12 Dutch elections where repeal of the new law will be on the ballot. This chance may go to waste, however, should their native clientele neglect to get out and vote.

As referred to in popular media, the "stoner vote" is critical to repealing this legislation. Should Dutch "stoners" struggle to muster up

the energy to reach the polls that day or merely forget the election is happening altogether, the marijuana ban may become permanent.

"We are trying to make clear to cannabis consumers all over Holland ... that this year is your last chance to save your cannabis policy and your coffee shop," Marc Josemans, head of Maastricht's coffee shop association told The Huffington Post. "And therefore, it's about time you get out of your lazy chairs on Sept. 12 and vote for a cannabis-friendly party."

The distribution and usage of cannabis has never been legal in the Netherlands, rather it has been tolerated by the government and police force. Due to recent pressure from the rest of the EU, leniency may shift with the passing of the ban.

"The rationale behind it (the ban) was to prevent injury to tourists who come over, eat or smoke too much and freak out or jump in a canal — which actually happens far more than you'd think — but there also seems to be some political pressure from the EU behind it," said Patrick Mitchell '11, a resident of the Netherlands, in an email interview. "Belgium was complaining that many people from France were coming up and buying it (marijuana) at the border then driving back

through Belgium, trafficking it along the way."

Because of this illicit trafficking, the south Netherlands was the first to implement the ban, causing several coffee shops' profit to decline, closing their doors for good.

"It is extremely doubtful the coffee shops (can) survive if the policy continues," said Josemans.

The other problem is the rise in the black market trade of marijuana around the country. It is suspected that coffee shops shutting down, combined with increased restrictions on the purchase of cannabis, will lead to citizens selling the drug to tourists privately. With this potential rise in the black-market trade, some expect violence as a result.

"There are already a lot of blank storefronts, and I can see a lot more of (the shops) closing because of this law," said recent Amsterdam visitor Tim Lindberg '10 in an email interview. "Along with this increase in illegal trade, we are bound to see more violence."

The country has already seen a 60 percent profit loss from restricting the trade in the southern provinces and protesters have been calling for a repeal of the ban, claiming discrimination.

Those elected to serve as the new

administration have the decision of either upholding or removing the ban. Should the ban come into full effect in Amsterdam, the level of harm that could follow remains unknown, but dreaded nonetheless.

"I'm not sure what effect it will have on Amsterdam," said Mitchell. "The (tobacco) smoking ban enacted in July 2008 is pretty much ignored and, as far as I can tell, not enforced. If the new 'resident only law' is enforced, it will probably just move the activity into the streets, with the locals buying and taking their cut selling it on the black market."

In North Carolina, a state where marijuana is decriminalized, the question of its legality remains an issue. House Bill 577, which would legalize cannabis for medical use, has been held under consideration for the past two years.

"When it comes to legalizing (marijuana), I'm all for it," said Assistant Professor of Political Science Robert Duncan. "It isn't a gateway drug; it helps people with depression and other serious medical issues."

Duncan continued, "Last I heard, a survey found about 70-80 percent of people in favor of it, so the real question is: why isn't the government legalizing cannabis?"

Fake cigarette scandal: dead flies and more

BY HAEJIN SONG
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Recipe to make fake cigarettes: add asbestos, a little bit of mold, dead flies, and finally, human excrement.

Amidst the cigarette smuggling cases that have surfaced in the UK, British detectives recently uncovered that some of the counterfeits had been composed of these repugnant substances.

"I have never ever heard that," said an anonymous employee at a large North Carolina tobacco outlet. "That is crazy. If this is a true story, I know I wouldn't smoke."

Others may think twice before lighting a cigarette for now but for some, habits will be habits.

"I've been smoking for like two years," said an anonymous student. "You don't suddenly quit a habit because of a blip in a kind of tobacco you may not even smoke."

According to Russia Today, Swiss-based brand protection company, MS Intelligence, launched Operation Empty Discarded Pack Collection. Through this investigation, undercover detectives spent weeks looking through litter bins and scanning pavements for cigarette butts to understand the scale of the black markets, reported Sunday Mercury.

MS Intelligence found that 31 percent of the retrieved cigarette packets were either counterfeits or smuggled into the country, compared to the mere 14 percent last year.

In Derbyshire of England, a load of cigarettes were made from crushed dead flies.

Will O'Reilly, former Scotland Yard detective and current researcher for tobacco group Philip Morris, told Sunday Mercury, "Bring a container of cigarettes into this country and you're talking 1.5 million British pounds, which roughly equates to \$2.4 million."

This isn't the first time black markets of the tobacco industry have cheated brand name companies and taxpayers. A

spokesman for lobby group International Tax and Investment Centre said, "Duty (tax) goes unpaid on almost one in three cigarettes smoked in Birmingham."

Nowadays, many fake cigarettes originate from the Far East, especially China, and are in packaging almost identical to the real thing. Sunday Mercury reported that trade is no longer dominated by so-called "White Van Man" bulk-buying abroad, but rather, the system has become much more elaborate.

These types of cigarettes, nicknamed "whites" in the industry, are legally produced abroad for the purpose of smuggling into other markets, such as the UK market. They are then sold illegally to avoid tax deduction.

The TaxPayers' Alliance in the UK found that 12.2 billion British pounds, or \$19.8 billion, was lost to the illegal cigarette trade in the financial year of 2009-2010. In addition, a significant 50 percent of hand-rolled tobacco is illegal.

The lack of certainty in the tobacco products being sold is a large concern.

"There are certain regulations we have to follow because of fake cigarettes," said an anonymous employee at the North Carolina tobacco outlet. "We have limits on kinds of cigarettes, and we can't return any cigarettes because we can't guarantee that the cigarettes coming back to us are real."

The sheer volume of the illicit trade and discovery of unnatural substances has been gaining attention from both smokers and nonsmokers.

While some smokers may think of dead flies next time they grab a cigarette, others remain apathetic to the discovery.

"After Upton Sinclair's 'The Jungle' did people become skeptical of eating meat for a significant period of time?" asked Early College student Yasir Azam. "No," Azam answered his own question. "A short drop in sales, then publicity of 'reform,' followed by amnesia. Smokers will forget this just as they forgot the rats in their hotdogs."

Shell Oil recklessly plunges into Alaskan waters, lawsuit now filed

BY ALAYNA BRADLEY
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Shell Oil Company has spent years trying to obtain permission to drill off the coast of Alaska, in which time they have faced lawsuits, flack from environmental organizations, gigantic sea-ice blocking drilling sites and, most recently, the damage to the containment dome — a crucial mechanism in preventing environmental damage in case of oil leaks.

Due to this critique and damage, Shell Oil has canceled its plans to drill this season and decided to hold off on the project until next year.

On Sept. 8, Shell Oil began drilling 70 miles off the Alaskan coast in the Chukchi Sea. Shell has been under scrutiny from groups like Greenpeace and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility — also known as Peer, a group that helps US federal and state employees sound the alarm on environmental protection issues — due to potentially insufficient testing of its oil-leak prevention mechanism.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar stated that all exploration in Alaska would be done under "the strongest oversight, safety requirements and emergency response plans ever established."

According to documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, however, the capping stack was only tested for about two hours. The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Health had just two officials present at the testing. The Guardian reports that the group filing suit against Shell is Peer.

"The first test merely showed that Shell could dangle its cap in 200 feet of water without dropping it," said Kathryn Douglass, a Peer staff lawyer, in an interview with The Guardian. "The second test showed the capping system could hold up under laboratory conditions for up to 15 minutes without crumbling. Neither result should give the American public much

comfort."

Shell responded, arguing that the capping stack was one of many mechanisms that will be deployed in the case of an oil spill. They did not, however, address the brief amount of time spent testing the capping stack.

It is no surprise that radical environmental organization Greenpeace has responded negatively to Shell Oil drilling in Alaska.

"Such recklessness wouldn't look out of place in a stock-car race," Ben Ayliffe, senior Arctic campaigner at Greenpeace told The Guardian. "The only option now is for the US government to call a halt to Shell's plans to open up the frozen north because the company is so clearly unable to operate safely in the planet's most extreme environment."

Biology major Kristy Lapenta '15 shared similar concerns.

"Alaska's ecosystem is delicate and its waters are home to many different endangered and vulnerable marine life," said Lapenta. "I really dislike that Shell now has permission to drill there."

At the same time that Shell began drilling, the company was also performing its final test of the oil spill containment dome. During this test, the dome broke.

A Shell company representative told Bloomberg, "We are disappointed that the dome has not yet met our stringent acceptance standards, but as we have said all along, we will not conduct any operation until we are satisfied that we are fully prepared to do it safely."

As a result of these setbacks and criticisms, Shell Oil has announced it will postpone all drilling for oil this year and instead plans on drilling smaller "top holes" in preparation for the following year.

At last, Greenpeace and other concerned citizens can take a deep breath until Shell addresses the pending lawsuit, the Alaskan coast's valued nature, and the failed containment dome.