

Increase in explosions of home labs is blamed on Colorado marijuana law

DENVER — When Colorado legalized marijuana two years ago, one problem was not fully anticipated: exploding houses.

But that is exactly what firefighters, courts, and lawmakers across the state are now confronting. Amateur marijuana alchemists are turning their kitchens and basements into “Breaking Bad”-style laboratories, using flammable chemicals to extract potent drops of a marijuana concentrate commonly called hash oil and sometimes accidentally blowing up their homes and lighting themselves on fire.

The trend is not limited to Colorado — officials from Florida to Illinois to California have reported similar problems — but the blasts are creating a special headache for lawmakers and courts here, the state at the center of legal marijuana.

Even as cities try to clamp down on homemade hash oil and lawmakers consider outlawing it, some enthusiasts argue for their right to make it and defense lawyers say the practice can no longer be considered a crime under the 2012 constitutional amendment that made marijuana legal to grow, process, sell, and smoke.

“This is uncharted territory,” said state Representative Mike Foote, a Democrat from northern Colorado who is grappling with how to address the problem of hash-oil explosions. “These things come up for the first time, and no one’s dealt with them before.”

Over the past year, a hash-oil explosion in a motel in Grand Junction sent two people to a hospital. In Colorado Springs, an explosion in a third-floor apartment shook the neighborhood and sprayed glass across a parking lot. And in an accident in Denver, neighbors reported a “ball of fire” that left three people hospitalized.

The explosions occur as people pump butane fuel through a tube packed with raw marijuana plants to draw out the psychoactive ingredient tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, producing a golden, highly potent concentrate that people sometimes call honey oil, earwax, or shatter. The process can fill a room with volatile butane vapors that can be ignited by an errant spark.

“They get enough vapors inside the building and it goes off, and it’ll bulge out the walls,” said Chuck Mathis, the fire marshal in Grand Junction, where the Fire Department responded to four explosions last year. “They always have a different story: ‘Nothing happened’ or ‘I was cooking food, and all of a sudden there was an explosion.’ They always try to blame it on something else.”

There were 32 such blasts across Colorado in 2014, up from 12 a year earlier, according to the Rocky Mountain High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which coordinates federal and state drug enforcement efforts.

No one has been killed, but the fires have wrecked homes and injured dozens of people.

By Jack Healy