

County takes steps against synthetic marijuana

By Beth Smith

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They are intelligent, innovative and usually one step ahead of the law.

Makers of synthetic marijuana-type drugs marketed as herbal incense products, K2 or K3, among other "street names" have been tweaking the components to maintain the drug's legal status and stay ahead of law makers attempting to ban selling and possessing these products.

County government officials on Tuesday began taking steps to outlaw these substances in Henderson County and hopefully keep pace or maybe even move out in front of synthetic marijuana manufacturers.

The Henderson Fiscal Court passed the first reading of an ordinance making it illegal to sell or possess various components and derivatives of cannabinoids used to make synthetic marijuana. The second reading of the ordinance is slated for March 6.

Before the vote, County Attorney Steve Gold, along with a medical professional, a recovering drug addict and law enforcement personnel, presented information to the panel regarding the prevalence and potency of synthetic marijuana.

"This stuff is being sold all kinds of places throughout Henderson," Gold said, adding that synthetic marijuana is particularly popular among young people. "We've talked to people who are somewhat semi-professionals at taking drugs and they say it's some of the worst stuff they've ever taken. What it is, is synthetic marijuana, cannabinoids agnostis and the like."

Gold said the drugs are marketed as potpourri or herbal incense and as "100 percent legal."

Dr. Robert Fawcett with Methodist Hospital's ER spoke of what he has experienced as an emergency room physician since the introduction of synthetic marijuana.

"I've been practicing in the emergency room since 1993. About three years ago, I saw my first case of K2 involving a gentleman the age 60. He was found lying face down in the mud. He had to be resuscitated. He admitted to smoking synthetic marijuana. I had to do a scan to check out his heart because he had arrhythmia — all do to with smoking this drug," Fawcett said.

"I've also seen children, teenagers and young adults who come into the ER, either agitated, paranoid or with psychotic type symptoms from smoking this drug. They get euphoria. People get addicted to the high. It can cause hallucinations ... A lot of the patients are belligerent, abusive to the staff ... It's caused some kids to have medical problems — problems with rehab and bringing out a psychotic break."

"I saw my first case three years ago," he said. "Now we see about three a month."

Fawcett said the drug is currently legal in Kentucky, and the first he'd heard of it was at a conference in New Orleans. Louisiana has since made it illegal, he said.

"Manufacturers can change the chain of it and alter (the components) so that (synthetic marijuana) have the same effect, but is legal" to possess and sell, he said.

"The Commonwealth of Kentucky has made a certain portion of these types of substances illegal," Gold said. "Well, the law was passed. So manufacturers tweaked it a little bit and next thing you know, what they're selling has, in some situations, worse effects than what was just made illegal.

"They are trying to stay ahead of the law, and the state Legislature takes awhile to make their laws," Gold said. "Which is one of the reasons, we are coming to fiscal court today to ask if the process can be made a little bit quicker and we can keep up with manufacturers on a county level."

"The ordinance we've crafted is pretty broad ..." to cover components of synthetic marijuana, he said.

"This isn't just Kentucky," County Judge-executive Hugh McCormick said. "This is on a national level. The U.S. Attorney General and the attorney general of Kentucky is working on this. But on a county basis, we can get something done faster" than on the state and federal level.

"Part of what today is about ... We wanted you as magistrates to know that it is affecting people right here in Henderson," Gold said. There are people showing up at the ER, in convulsions, having seizures ... This isn't something that is some sort of scare tactic. This is the real deal," he said.

A recovering addict, whose name isn't being released in this article, spoke to fiscal court and told them that she'd tried synthetic drugs after purchasing them at a convenience store in Henderson.

"The effects of it were chest pains, anxiety and agitation for three or four weeks after I'd used ... You can go to most gas stations and convenience stores" to purchase these products, she said. Sometimes the packages are found on the counter or they are kept in a backroom, she said, and drug paraphernalia is available at these places to smoke the drugs.

Treg Brooks, with the Department of Alcohol Beverage Control in Kentucky, and Henderson County Sheriff's Detective Bill Mills spoke about the pervasiveness of synthetic marijuana in this area.

"If there's anything I'd like to impress upon you, it's the prevalence of this product in Henderson County," Brooks said. "It's in convenience stores, liquor stores and tobacco shops. We've purchased it for \$11 to \$45. It's sold in packages, little jars. The prevalence would shock you. Some of the stores also sell drug paraphernalia to go along with this product."

Brooks said it varies from store to store where the drugs are located.

"Most of the time, you have to ask for it ... Sometimes it's under the counter. Sometimes they have to go to another room to get it," he said.

Gold said, "So if it was incense or potpourri or something sold to smell, they probably wouldn't keep it in a backroom."

Mills said the level of potency "varies."

"They keep changing the chemicals in it," he said. "Some of it, has the affect of methamphetamine, some has the affect of cocaine, some mimics marijuana. The person's body chemistry has an affect on it to. Some people take it and react like to marijuana. We've had some cases, they fall out in the street and go into convulsions."

"We had one in our ER who after smoking it, he went into convulsions and hallucinations and wanted to kill everyone in his family," Mills said. "I'm getting several calls a week from citizens and from people who've used it and they say, 'You have to do something. You've got to get this stuff stopped.'"

Mills said that in 2010, the Poison Control Center received more than 300 calls about synthetic marijuana. "In 2011, they had more than 3,470 ... that's what we're looking at."

"Hopefully, business owners will take this as a call to stop selling the stuff," Gold said. "You're never going to completely get rid of anything like this, especially because of the Internet."

However, if it's illegal, Gold said, "It will make it a little bit harder for the otherwise law-abiding young person to get their hands on it."

If the ordinance passes, those convicted of possession of synthetic marijuana could face a \$250 fine and up to 90 days in jail. Those convicted of trafficking synthetic cannabinoids, could face a \$500 fine and up to 12 months in jail.



