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Conference Committee Advances Retail Cannabis Bill without Public Notice

*Coalition calls on legislature to reject bill as insufficient to address systemic racism,
agricultural and economic equity and access*

Montpelier, VT — A legislative Conference Committee assigned to reconcile House and Senate versions of retail cannabis legislation S.54 apparently reached compromise on outstanding provisions Tuesday, September 15, 2020, without publishing notice of their meeting on the legislature's website or live streaming their meeting per current legislative norms. Members of the public have only been made aware of the Conference Committee's actions via [media reports](#) after the fact.

S.54 is a bill currently in the Vermont legislature that would establish a system for taxation, regulation, and retail sales of cannabis, following the state's legalization of cannabis possession in 2018. The bill, which a growing coalition of advocates assert fails to address in any significant way the devastating historical social and economic impact of marijuana on African Americans or the current impact of systemic racism on the cannabis industry, now moves to the floor of the House and Senate.

"Passage of this bill is beyond denial or indifference to the real issue of racism that is more in our faces than any time in history. Passing this bill makes elected officials complicit," said Mark Hughes of Justice for All. "Black folks are beyond tired. Enough!"

Members of a coalition—including [Justice for All](#), the [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont \(NOFA-VT\)](#), [Vermont Growers Association \(VGA\)](#), [Rural Vermont](#), and [Trace, Inc.](#)—have received significant support from Vermonters in demanding to include racial justice and agricultural concerns in retail cannabis legislation. A petition circulated by the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance has received nearly 500 signatures, and outreach from the coalition partners has generated over 400 emails and phone calls to Conference Committee members over the past several weeks.

Conference Committee members expressed concerns around racial justice in relation to a seat belt provision that was introduced late in the process and then quickly set aside, while at the same time they failed to address or incorporate specific provisions suggested by racial justice advocates earlier this year.

With the bill now moving to the full House and Senate, advocates are calling on legislators and the Governor to reject S.54 and instead work with their communities to develop equitable cannabis legislation that truly addresses systemic racism in cannabis prohibition and the emerging legal cannabis industry. Advocates are urging the Governor to direct the Marijuana Commission to provide research and recommendations on systemic racism and the cannabis industry in the same manner in which due diligence was provided on Taxation and Regulation, Road Safety and Education.

"We have been told explicitly and implicitly by committee members and industry lobbyists throughout this legislative process that the communities we represent, and the concerns we have, with respect to racial justice and agricultural and economic equity, are not politically important," said Graham Unangst-Rufenacht of Rural Vermont. "We cannot accept legislation significantly affecting our members which

does not include their voices. We urge the public, the Governor, and members of the House and Senate to stand with our organizations and the communities we represent in saying “NO” to the bill emerging from the Conference Committee, and to engage with us in shaping just and equitable tax and regulate legislation in 2021.”

S.54 does not prioritize restorative justice and inclusion of those most harmed by our nation's racist history of cannabis prohibition, criminalization, and mass incarceration. The bill as put forth does not adequately address the harm done by the "war on drugs." Similarly to S.54, a retail cannabis law passed by Massachusetts prioritized licensing for "social equity applicants." However, without financing and technical assistance to accompany those licenses, this initiative has proven insufficient. More than two years into its implementation, the program had 70 successful applicants but only 2 businesses were open.

S.54 also disproportionately benefits Vermont's existing medical dispensaries by giving them sole access to integrated licenses and a jumpstart on market access. The bill does not consider cannabis cultivation agriculture, excluding most land and infrastructure in agricultural easements and current use, and most farmers from having equitable access to this crop and market that could support their farm income and keep our working landscape open.

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About NOFA-VT: *The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont promotes organic practices to build an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just Vermont agricultural system that benefits all living things. We are proud to have nearly 1100 members throughout the state and to certify over 800 farms and processors to the USDA National Organic Program Standards.*