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### Cannabis Tourism in Humboldt County - Moving Forward

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# HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

## Cannabis Tourism in Humboldt County: Moving Forward



**Report by:**

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Cover photos clockwise from the top courtesy of Riverbar Pharms Bed & Breakfast, Humboldt Cannabis Tours and the authors.

## Abstract

There are a host of issues that may influence the growth of cannabis tourism including for example state and local regulations, resident opinions about cannabis tourism, adequate infrastructure to support tourists, and the fact that cannabis remains illegal federally (Lovelace, 2019). Three years after recreational cannabis sales started in California, this report explores cannabis tourism as an industry in Humboldt County, California. This study involved personal interviews with seven individuals including tourism officials, tour guides, local business owners and entrepreneurs. Multiple topics related to cannabis tourism were explored during the interviews, including for example changes in tourists and tourism visits, impacts on retail dispensaries, adequacy of infrastructure to support cannabis tourism entrepreneurs, as well as other barriers to entry in the industry.

## Introduction

The 2016 passage of Proposition 64 in California allowed for the recreational adult use of cannabis products beginning on January 1, 2018. This opened up the current marketplace for cannabis beyond strictly medical use, including for example cannabis tourism. Cannabis tourism can be simply defined as the act of traveling to a destination with the intent to consume, purchase, and learn about cannabis in a legal manner. Cannabis tourism can also include visits to dispensaries, cultivation and processing facilities, attending cannabis friendly retreats, and many other activities, from cannabis culinary classes to glass blowing demos.

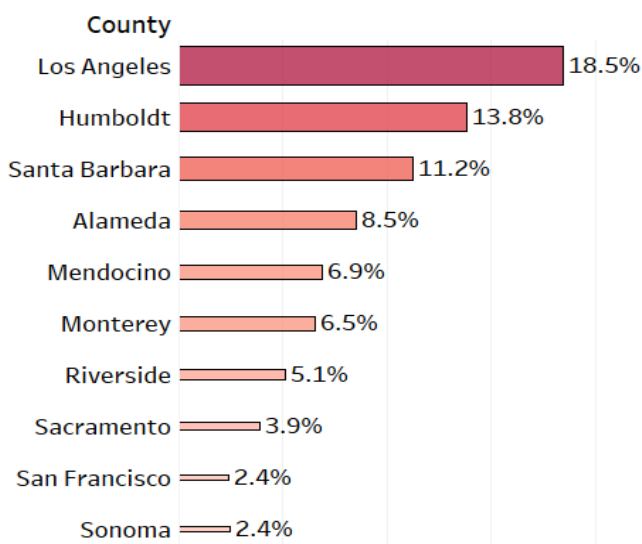
Due to the fact recreational cannabis was only recently legalized in select states and remains classified as a Schedule 1 narcotic by the DEA, cannabis tourism is a fairly new industry and little research has been conducted on the subject. However, cannabis tourism can be seen as a beneficial opportunity for many communities throughout Humboldt County, with California and other legal states actively pursuing legal cannabis tourism (Hauser, 2019).

Since recreational cannabis is a relatively new endeavor in California, we looked to other states to understand the impact on visitation following legalization. In Colorado for example, recreational cannabis was made commercially available in 2014, contributing to hotels in the state experiencing a significant increase in rooms rented per month, as well as an increase in the average daily room rate. In total, the implementation of legal cannabis sales increased revenue by \$23.71 million per month, showing that cannabis tourism has an economic effect on Colorado's hotel industry (Meehan, 2020). In Northern California, statistics on the industry are generally unavailable. The County of Sonoma however, funded an economic report in 2018 analyzing the impact of cannabis tourism on the region. According to their research, for every kilogram of cannabis produced, the county economy generates \$7,800 of business revenue across hundreds of industries, from hospitality to retail (The Economic Impact of the Cannabis Industry Sonoma County,

California, 2018, p. 2). In the legal market, as many as 2,800 jobs could be supported in the industry, once taking into consideration all of the supply chain connections.

In regards to Humboldt County, the industry stretches back decades. In some respects, the cannabis industry replaced the declining timber and fishing industries in the county, which resulted in Humboldt's "Green Rush". In 2011, it was estimated that 26% of Humboldt County's economy was related to cannabis industries, including both legal and illegal operations (Get Ready for Marijuana Legalization, 2014). While more recent data on the economic impact of cannabis on Humboldt County is not currently available, we can look to other signs to understand the importance of the cannabis industry in Humboldt County. According to a 2018 report published by the Humboldt County Workforce Development Board (Claesgens & Kraft, 2018), the cannabis industry is a part of "multiple sectors" (p. 3) including agriculture, manufacturing, distribution, law, accounting, permitting, and marketing, indicating the reach of the industry within Humboldt County.

**Table 1** Top 10 counties in total cannabis licenses by percentage



Weaver, R. J. (2020). Humboldt County Cannabis License Overview (pp. 1-7, Rep.). CA: Employment Development Department.

Another report from 2020 produced by Randall Weaver, a labor market consultant for Humboldt County, provides an overview of active cannabis licenses in Humboldt County which gives a sense of the size of the county's cannabis industry in comparison to other parts of California (Weaver, 2020). According to the report, out of the total number of cannabis licenses statewide, Humboldt County ranks in second place following Los Angeles County. Although Los Angeles County holds more annual and provisional cannabis licenses, the population is 10.1 million, greatly exceeding Humboldt County's population of around a 135,000. As shown in Table 1 (Weaver, 2020, p. 2) close to sixty percent of California's active cannabis licenses are found in the "Big Six" counties, composed of Los Angeles (18.5%),

Humboldt (13.8%), Santa Barbara (11.2%), Alameda (8.5%), Mendocino (6.9%), and Monterey Counties (6.5%).

“With the recent implementation of recreational cannabis, California is also poised to become a major cannabis destination. It is distinguished by its legacy for sun-grown cannabis and an international reputation for cannabis culture” (Giraud, 2019, p.109). Considering the growing interest in cannabis tourism, the international reputation of Humboldt County cannabis and potential complement to the county’s existing tourism resources, cannabis tourism presents an opportunity for Humboldt County.

There are a host of factors that may influence the growth of cannabis tourism, including for example state and local regulations, resident opinions, adequate infrastructure to support tourists, and the fact that cannabis remains illegal federally (Lovelace, 2019). This study considered cannabis tourism as an industry in Humboldt County, California. Multiple topics related to cannabis tourism were explored during the interviews, including for example changes in tourists and tourism visits, impacts on retail dispensaries, adequacy of infrastructure to support cannabis tourism entrepreneurs, as well as other barriers to entry in the industry.

## Methods

In advance of research taking place the protocol for data collection was approved by Humboldt State University’s Institutional Review Board. All interviewees consented to be quoted in manuscripts and presentations resulting from the research. Given that legal cannabis tourism is a relatively new tourism product and research topic, qualitative methods were employed for this study to explore relevant topics with the interviewees, adult community members living in Humboldt County. Initially, individuals known to the researchers were contacted to participate in the project. Using snowball sampling, interviewees were asked to share contact details with other leaders in tourism and/or cannabis tourism in Humboldt County. This enabled the research team to access a wider array of individuals which resulted in additional participants in the study.



Data collection took place between November and December 2020. In total five interviews were conducted over video conferencing with at least two members of the research team present at each interview. Each

interview lasted roughly one hour. Two additional interviews were conducted over email due to scheduling conflicts. A set of questions were developed to ask each interviewee to ensure consistency across the interviews. Interview questions were based on the guiding points of the study, however during interviews other questions often came up due to responses or direction of interviewees.

Interview questions asked of all interviewees included: 1) Have there been changes in the numbers and types of tourist visits to Humboldt county due to cannabis tourism since legalization? 2) What has been the impact of cannabis tourism, if any, on retail dispensaries and legal cannabis farms in Humboldt County? 3) What public feedback about cannabis tourism has been heard from constituents since legalization? 4) Is the infrastructure to support cannabis tourism in Humboldt County adequate? What is needed? And 5) How have regulations (city, county and state) regarding cannabis impacted cannabis tourism in Humboldt County?

The researchers conducted debriefing meetings after each interview to reflect on aspects of the conversation and identify trends and highlights. Interviews were auto-transcribed by the web-conferencing tool, reviewed, and edited for clarity. All documents including transcripts and notes were reviewed multiple times taking into consideration the context, the main ideas, and the objectives of the study. A two-step process was followed to analyze the data (Creswell, 2013). Initially, the interview data was broken down into broad categories represented across interviewees. The second step consisted of identifying relationships between categories to understand where items were related or overlapped.

## Participants

For this project multiple individuals agreed to be interviewed and share their opinions and knowledge about cannabis tourism in Humboldt County. Participant bios are included below.

Matt Kurth is the owner and operator of Humboldt Cannabis Tours. Kurth's company has an agritourism niche in Humboldt County by offering tours to working cannabis farms. His tours have an educational focus where adults 21 and over are provided with the opportunity to visit legal working cannabis farms.



Photo courtesy of Humboldt Cannabis Tours

Laura Lasseter is the director of operations at the Southern Humboldt Business and Visitors Bureau (SHBVB) in Garberville, California. Lasseter is also a founding member of the organization which was formed to give a voice to tourism and other businesses of Southern Humboldt, including cannabis.

Ken Hamik is an operating partner of The Ganjery, a cannabis dispensary in McKinleyville, California. In addition to the dispensary, The Ganjery is in the process of applying for both manufacture and distribution permits. In Hamik's words, they are interested in "working with local farmers and the genetics they are producing to find a way of branding and bringing (them) to a larger market in California."

Kevin Jodrey is a well-known Humboldt County cannabis cultivator and nationally respected cannabis expert. Jodrey is the owner of the One Log Cookies dispensary on the southern county line and takes pride in improving and forwarding the modern cannabis movement in Humboldt. Throughout his time in the industry, he has been featured in numerous publications spoken at universities, judged at the Emerald Cup, and has worked on cannabis related educational shows for National Geographic and A&E.

Julie Benbow is the executive director of the Humboldt County Visitors Bureau. The Bureau is the official Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) for Humboldt County and promotes all of the county's assets including redwoods, beaches, festivals, craft beer and so on. According to Benbow the Bureau has two main roles in regards to promoting the county: Business to Business (B2B) and Business to Consumer (B2C). In 2019, the Bureau began taking "an active role in the cannabis arena."



Photo courtesy of Riverbar Pharms Bed & Breakfast

Desiree Robinson is the owner and operator of Riverbar Pharms, Humboldt County's first bud and breakfast near Fortuna, California. The cannabis friendly B & B offers accommodations such as cannabis-themed breakfasts, a delivery service from a local dispensary, and spa treatments. They promote all that Humboldt County has to offer to its visitors.

Brian Applegarth is the Founder and Chair of the California Cannabis Tourism Association. He is committed to leading the advancement of cannabis tourism throughout the state and is a prevailing adviser for hospitality-based businesses who are interested in incorporating cannabis, hemp, and CBD into their model.



## Humboldt County and Cannabis Tourism

As noted above, Humboldt County has a well-known international reputation for cannabis. While it is likely tourists and travelers have visited Humboldt County due to cannabis for many years, visiting Humboldt County for the purpose of legal cannabis tourism has only been an option in California since January 2018. Related to the guiding questions of the study, participants were asked to consider changes they had noticed in tourists visiting Humboldt County since legalization. At the time the interviews were conducted, the world was still in the midst of a global pandemic.

Many of our interviewees referenced the impact of the pandemic on tourism visits to Humboldt County in general. Some experienced reduced numbers of tourists or general inquiries due to the ongoing pandemic that has curtailed travel. Others saw a different trend. Hamik noted that Covid-19 had brought visitors to Humboldt County. Hamik stated, “... there's a rush of a lot of people that are wanting to get out of town, San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Vegas. Fill in the blank. They want to get someplace else. They want to bring their kids to open air. A place that doesn't have a lot of risks.”

Another interviewee, Jodrey, had a similar story saying,

“we saw a change in tourism, because what you started to see was people who always wanted to come to Humboldt County and experience it. And they started to drive up from the Bay Area and from Southern California, and from other places to experience social distancing in a place that's designed for social distancing. So, we're geographically the size of Connecticut and we have a population of 120,000. It's a supernatural circumstance for people who want space.”

We also had conversations with interviewees regarding general trends in cannabis tourism they had noticed in the county since legalization before the pandemic interrupted travel. According to Benbow, while the county's DMO does not receive many inquiries related to cannabis or cannabis tourism, she hopes “more farms will get certified for tours, and (cannabis themed) dinners become more regular, and more dispensaries and safe places to consume will open throughout the county.”



Photo courtesy of Riverbar Pharms Bed & Breakfast

Kurth, who has direct contact with cannabis tourists due to his cannabis tour company, stated that while he had not seen changes in his customers in general he does see spikes in

people from certain geographical areas where cannabis was about to become legal. Kurth said that “right before Michigan (went) legal, we got a ton of people from Michigan. And then Maine was about to go legal and I got a ton of people from Maine. Switzerland was



Photo courtesy of Humboldt Cannabis Tours

Switzerland” noting that these visitors were considering getting into the cannabis industry in some way. Applegarth, also saw investors visiting California to learn more about the cannabis industry and “understand how to position back in their home market, where the money’s at and where the hurdles are.”

Robinson shared that she had seen changes in the numbers of tourists to Riverbar Pharms pre-pandemic. She noted that “things like Murder Mountain on Netflix slowed things down in the beginning for about a year.” However, Robinson said that it is slowly rising. In their 3rd summer open in 2020, Robinson said “we had the most guests visiting specifically to stay at our B&B. Most had been following us on social media for a while or found us and finally had the chance to visit”.

## Results

The main themes repeated throughout the interviews regarded barriers to entry in the legal cannabis tourism industry. These included legal and financial constraints, the lack of infrastructure required to support increased tourism, and the lack of education regarding the recreational cannabis industry. Results from the interviews are organized around these barriers that emerged in the data analysis process.

### ***Legal and Financial Constraints***

As of 2020, there are only a handful of cannabis friendly lodges and one cannabis tour guide in licensed operation throughout the county. Of the barriers discussed, legal and financial constraints such as permitting processes and regulations are one of the major issues many Humboldt County industry workers face. Between the high costs associated with permitting farms and the fact that legal cannabis farmers generally make less revenue than they would selling on the black market, the cost benefit analysis of going legal does not make sense for many farmers. According to Humboldt County's New Cannabis Landscape Workforce Report, estimates of total farms in Humboldt County continue to range from 10,000-15,000 with only an estimated 15% in active processing for licenses or permits. That being said, that percentage has begun to rise in response to violation enforcement and compliance agreements (Claesgens & Kraft, 2018). These legal and

financial constraints help explain the reason for such a low percentage of cultivators in Humboldt County actually pursuing a legal pathway.

Currently in Humboldt County cannabis farms can obtain a tourism license to have day visitors to their farms. Huckleberry Hill Farms, located just outside the town of Garberville, became one of the first cannabis farms in the state to obtain a license to allow visitors to their farm in 2021 (Bryant, 2021). However, the major barrier for these legal farms is that



Photo courtesy of Riverbar Pharms Bed & Breakfast

the county does not currently allow onsite cannabis sales or consumption. These visits provide a great opportunity for visitors to learn about the growing process but do not provide the opportunity for sampling or sales. Kurth's tour company has experienced the same issue when it comes to his farm tours. Currently he has to take his guests to dispensaries after visiting the farms as they cannot consume the product during the tour. Kurth went on to say, "Onsite sales are critical...All my customers want it, all the farmers want it. I want it. The county wants it. Everybody wants it, we just need to make it happen."

Cultivators can grow, process, and sell their products in the same location, although they cannot currently offer tours of their facilities or onsite consumption in that same location. This makes it difficult for cultivators to expand their market into the tourism industry in a similar way to how the wine industry operates. Allowing farms to market themselves as an experiential

destination through onsite sales, consumption, tours, and lodging, could have a large economic value in rural Humboldt communities and surrounding areas. If farmers were allowed to combine onsite sales, consumption, and lodging, it could lead to Humboldt County's rural cannabis farms and surrounding communities to become multi-day tourism destinations. According to Claesgens and Kraft (2018), "It is believed cannabis tourism could help increase the demand for Humboldt-grown cannabis, for Humboldt-branded products and for services that support "experience destination vacations." (p. 9). According to the report, an increase in demand for Humboldt products may result in an increase in jobs in tourism and in tourism-related sectors.

Many residents are starting to see the benefit the cannabis and tourism industry can have on their community. In Hamik's experience, "everyone's getting on board with cannabis, they understand that we've gone through the effort to transition from the black market to a legal pathway. And so, everybody, from the Chamber of Commerce to community residents are understanding the potential benefits from the industry." Destination based cannabis farms could entice tourists who would normally day trip through the area to stay

overnight. This in turn would provide an economic opportunity for cannabis cultivators and other tourism-based businesses in the area, such as restaurants, local retailers, and lodging establishments.

### ***Infrastructure***

As the demand for Humboldt-grown cannabis and tourism-based services increase, greater infrastructure will be required to support the influx of visitors to the area. Many Humboldt cannabis farms are located in remote areas of the county. The ruralness and limited accessibility of many farms have created barriers for businesses to enter the tourism industry. During Lasseter's interview she touched on the idea of infrastructure, "when you're wanting to commercially market a farm that sits steep on a hill...you must also think about how you fulfill all the ADA requirements." Due to limited vehicle access and the lack of ADA accessible infrastructure, it will require a major financial undertaking to develop these areas for tourism.

### ***Education***

Education was a theme repeated throughout the interviews conducted. It is essential for there to be a heavy focus on education in the cannabis industry across the board. This includes educating communities about the economic benefits of the industry, teaching tourists the proper and legal ways to consume, and ensuring farmers' authentic brand image is represented.

### ***The Community***

The cannabis industry has been a large economic driver in the Humboldt County area for generations. The majority of this income has historically been generated from illegal operations, in turn creating mixed opinions towards the industry throughout Humboldt County communities. According to a survey of resident attitudes towards tourism in Humboldt County (Pachmayer et al., 2018), while a majority of residents agreed that cannabis tourism would benefit the county, 35.4% agreed or strongly agreed that the image of their community would be negatively affected because of cannabis tourism.

According to Lasseter of the Southern Humboldt Business and Visitors Bureau,  
If you talk to somebody in Humboldt County and they think that nothing they do touches cannabis or anything to do with cannabis, then they have no idea because it is all intertwined, whether they want to believe that or not . . . there's been some overlap of cannabis related cash that's come through there.

Although there are individuals who oppose the cannabis industry, it is important to educate residents about the economic benefit cannabis tourism may have on their

community. Lasseter went on to state, "You might look down upon the cannabis industry, but then your car lot . . . hasn't sold 50 trucks this month. So maybe you do have some sort of tie with the cannabis community as much as you don't want to believe it."

The economic value of tourism in Humboldt County has been acknowledged for quite some time. When visitors come to the county to stay overnight it has direct economic benefit on the community in various ways. Overnight visitors are more likely to spend money at local retail shops, restaurants, and hotels. A simple way to track this income is through the transient occupancy tax (TOT). The TOT taxes visitors based on the cost of their lodging. This generates revenue for local governments to use for various beneficial projects throughout the community, from infrastructure improvements to environmental preservation. Although it is hard to track the TOT directly back to cannabis tourism, marketing Humboldt County as a cannabis destination could help keep tourists in the area for longer periods at a time, in turn helping generate more tourism revenue for the area. According to a study on the effects of cannabis tourism on hotel occupancy in Colorado (Meehan, 2020), there was a slight increase in the number of rooms rented per month and the average daily rate of hotel rooms after commercial cannabis legalization. The study found that once recreational cannabis was commercially available to the public, Colorado saw an increase of around 120,000 hotel rooms rented per month. This represents about 6% of the average 2,000,000 rooms rented per month. With the 6% rise in hotel occupancy, there was also an increase of the Average Daily Rate, which tracks average revenue earned per occupied room by day, by 3.8% or \$6.31.



### **The Tourists**

Kurth, owner and operator of Humboldt Cannabis Tours, discussed how his tours provide educational opportunities for his guests. "We touch the plants; we get our hands in the soil. There's a ton of education, it's a lot of learning and a lot of questions." This hands-on experience allows people to understand the process involved in cultivation, removing any negative stigma and showing the consumer where their product is coming from.

After educating guests about the growing process and getting them comfortable around the plant, it is essential to inform them of a safe and responsible way to consume cannabis. During the interview with Lasseter, consumer education was touched on a number of times,

So, you know, a lot of what we're working on is education and teaching consumers that this is not the same cannabis that you might have smoked 40 years ago. We have a lot of consumers in their 60s and 70s that are

interested in cannabis for a variety of different reasons, whether it be medicinal, recreational, whatever.

With the vast array of products available on the recreational market, choosing the right product can be overwhelming for new users. Educating people about the plants, proper ways to consume, and what would be the best-fitting products for them will help recreational cannabis become less taboo. This in turn would help Humboldt County market cannabis as another one of our tourism resources, just as we would the redwood forests or coastlines.

### **Authentic Brand Image**

Due to the fact cannabis has been a crucial part of the culture for many Humboldt County residents, it is essential to make sure an authentic story is being told when marketing the area to tourists. While it may take away from the authenticity in certain aspects, it is worth noting that Humboldt County has been the epicenter of cannabis for 40 years (Witt, 2019) and that can potentially be used as part of a grander marketing strategy. Many farmers have been working for decades to establish their products and farms, becoming a way of life. Since legalization in 2018, an array of farms have created successful companies, as they have been forced to brand themselves without legal help from the county or state. According to Lasseter, "From CNBC, to The New York Times, these farmers have attracted worldwide notoriety and have brought media recognition to the county that we otherwise would not have the funds capable of supporting."



## **Moving Forward**

In light of the results from our study we have several recommendations on how we should move forward with the cannabis tourism industry in Humboldt County including funding opportunities, the refurbishment of antiquated infrastructure, brand protection, improved education, and regional cooperation.

### **Funding Opportunities**

When it comes to creating regulations regarding legal cannabis, it is crucial for lawmakers to be properly informed on what would help farmers implement a successful business. It's worth noting that the United States government has subsidized American farmers since 1933, with the implementation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (Lincicome, 2020). Funding cannabis agriculture through government subsidies could have a large economic benefit on both the county and the state. Within the last year, Humboldt County has

established Project Trellis using revenue from cannabis taxes to help support local farmers. The funds can be utilized in a variety of ways including helping with the cost of permits and marketing their product. Expanding on and creating additional county funded programs to assist with the high cost of compliance and permitting could potentially help more of the “black market” expand into the legal field. Having more legal cannabis farmers in the rural parts of the county would give surrounding areas the opportunity to economically benefit from cannabis tourism.

### **Infrastructure**

In rural parts of the county, many of the roads and surrounding infrastructure have not seen public attention since the logging boom of the early 1900’s. Roads leading to many of the county’s farms are in need of extensive repair before they could adequately service tourists to the area. Updating this infrastructure would entail a large but worthwhile undertaking in order to adequately support an increase of visitors to these regions. In addition to transportation related infrastructure, another feature that could help farmers make the transition into the legal industry is helping them update their farms and facilities to reflect current county codes and ensure they are adhering to current ADA guidelines. A government funded program that gives industry workers a clear pathway to update their facilities to reflect current county codes and ADA guidelines, could streamline the process.

### **Brand and Product Protection**

As previously stated, numerous cultivators in the county have been developing their product and brand image for generations. This in turn has become a part of many residents’ culture and livelihood. Ensuring farmers’ authentic stories are told is very important in order to maintain the rich history the county has to offer. Currently the California Department of Food and Agriculture is working to establish a Cannabis Appellations Program designed to protect the geographical origins of products and how they are produced. “CDFA’s Cannabis Appellations Program will promote regional cannabis goods and local businesses, prevent the misrepresentation of a cannabis good’s origin, and support consumer confidence about a cannabis good’s origin and characteristics” (CDFA, 2021). This program would help provide legal protections for the products developed and produced here in Humboldt County offering local cultivators the opportunity to ensure their cannabis is protected against misrepresentation. Although this is a great way to protect Humboldt’s brand image, as of March 2021, the Cannabis Appellations Program has not been implemented by the CDFa.

### **Education**

In regards to educating tourists about cannabis, it would be beneficial for the local government and cannabis producers to work together in order to create an infographic informing the proper ways to consume cannabis products. Having an infographic that could be displayed at a variety of physical and online locations to ensure visitors are properly informed before consuming would help assure tourists have a safe and enjoyable

stay. Educating the community on the potential benefits of cannabis tourism could help eliminate negative stigma surrounding the plant and show residents the positive impacts the industry could have on the county. In addition, continuing to include residents and other interested parties in planning and decision making provides an opportunity to address concerns of residents and meet the goals a community has for developing cannabis tourism.

### **Regional Cooperation**

As noted above, currently the county utilizes Project Trellis to help cultivators with the start-up cost of permitting their farms. Yet, according to Benbow of the Humboldt County Visitors Bureau, "This project, however, has had some setbacks. The main cultivation regions of Northern Humboldt (Willow Creek area) and Southern Humboldt are not actually working together, rather forming their own alliances...There is going to be resident push back . . . and some obstacles (and prejudices) need to be overcome. Developing some really great education and messaging will have a positive impact and hopefully change perceptions."

It is particularly important for the Humboldt County cannabis industry to be working together when it comes to the marketing, branding, and regulation of Humboldt County cannabis and cannabis tourism. Ideally one umbrella entity that oversees everything including permitting farms, licensing tours and operators, advocating for the industry, and educating residents and tourists, could provide a solution for the industry. Having a cohesive group leading these efforts could make way for an effective plan moving forward, building a strong foundation on which the cannabis tourism industry in Humboldt County can build on.



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