

Meet the First Pro-Legalization Candidate in North Carolina

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Legalization of cannabis is a tremendously popular issue in North Carolina. While nearly 80% of people in the Tar Heel State support legalization in some form, state lawmakers have barely touched the issue. Jenna Wadsworth, the Democratic candidate for Commissioner of Agriculture, wants to change that.

Meet Jenna Wadsworth – Candidate for Commissioner of Agriculture

Jenna Wadsworth is not the type to wait around. At 21, voters elected her to serve as a Wake County Soil and Water Commissioner. That made her the youngest woman ever elected to office in North Carolina history.





Image courtesy of [Jenna Wadsworth](#).

Now, she's running for the state-level position of Commissioner of Agriculture. The office might not grab headlines the way the race for Governor or Attorney General does. However, the role holds a tremendous amount of power in a state whose number one industry is still agriculture. That's something Wadsworth wants more North Carolinians to understand.

"I'm running for this office to make people care about this office again," she said. "I hope that we can make people care about our farmers, our agricultural community and our local food system. I think COVID-19 has really shown us that the food system is broken."

The State of North Carolina Agriculture

In North Carolina, the Commissioner of Agriculture position has a broad set of responsibilities. Those responsibilities range from the State Fair to oil and gas issues. But the primary goal of the job, at least according to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture website, is "protecting, maintaining and enhancing the ability of agriculture to produce an adequate supply of food and fiber in North Carolina..."

To that effect, Wadsworth sees lots of room for improvement in the state.

"There were all of these existing disparities that have just been further exacerbated as a result of the pandemic," she said. "The includes the issue with consolidation and agriculture nationally. It's also what's happened with having less resilient local food systems and a lack of support for our small farmers for years. This is all just kind of a culmination of that."



Image courtesy of [Jenna Wadsworth](#).

Wadsworth says that she feels that North Carolina has ignored its small farmers.

“I feel like this is an industry that’s largely been left in the past and forgotten,” she said. “I’m running to be able to move it into the future to create a more just, sustainable and equitable future for everyone who calls North Carolina home.”

Taking A Stand on Legalization in North Carolina

Wadsworth has attracted attention for her stance on cannabis legalization, of which she is outwardly in favor. Notably, that stance is a first for any person running for a state-level position in North Carolina.

While the Commissioner of Agriculture in North Carolina has broad jurisdiction, lawmaking is not part of it. That means that despite her hard stance on legalization, she lacks the authority to directly change the state’s current laws. But Wadsworth says she believes the issue is an important one for North Carolina’s farmers and its economy.

“When we talk about cannabis legalization, I think it’s a huge economic opportunity for our farmers,” she said. “Those that have been growing tobacco and those that have recently transitioned into hemp, a lot of them have the institutional knowledge to be successful at growing cannabis.”

Wadsworth goes on to point out that the industry is not exactly new for North Carolina.

“If we’re being frank there’s probably some farmers up in western North Carolina that have been growing cannabis for a very long time,” she said. “So I think it’s a huge economic opportunity for them. I think it’s also a huge economic opportunity for our state.”

A Future in the Cannabis Industry

This is clearly an issue Wadsworth has spent time thinking about. For her, legalization is an answer to many of North Carolina’s latent problems, especially those in rural areas.

“I think cannabis legalization is also a way to build up rural communities and reduce brain drain from those communities,” she said. There would be actual viable economic opportunities for the next generation to want to stay and settle there.”

However, Wadsworth admits that this comes with a caveat. In many states which have legalized cannabis for recreational or medicinal purposes, large agribusinesses have often dominated the markets. This has made it difficult for small farmers to enter the industry. She says that this needs to be addressed as part of any legalization plan the state implements.

“It means making sure that we’re not allowing large, out-of-state corporations to come in, buy up large swaths of land, or be the ones who are the major players in this market,” she said. What I want to do is make sure that it actually benefits our small family farmers who call this state home.”

Side Effects of Legalization in North Carolina

Legalization, she said, could provide real economic opportunity for North Carolina’s rural areas. She believes it could also spawn a number of cottage industries as well.

“It would enhance rural tourism with these mom and pop shops,” she said. “Cannabis tourism is a very real thing. How cool would it be to see a farm that’s growing this and participating? You could go to some mom and pop shops and see it being processed. Or you could see it being used in a bakery. I think there’s a real opportunity to do something exciting and creative there.”



Image courtesy of [Jenna Wadsworth](#).

Wadsworth says that legalization in North Carolina is only a matter of time.

“It’s not a question of if it’s going to happen it’s a question of when it’s going to happen,” she said. “When it does, I am committed to making sure that we have an equitable and just industry that actually works for people that call North Carolina home.”

Legalization and Justice in North Carolina

Wadsworth paints a strong economic argument for legalizing cannabis in North Carolina. However, she also said that there are even more important aspects to the legalization fight.

“Perhaps most excitingly to me, cannabis legalization, I believe, holds the opportunity of helping us begin to achieve true social justice,” she said.



Image courtesy of [Jenna Wadsworth](#)

She went on to say that legalization would have a profound impact “for people of color who have been disproportionately criminalized and locked up on the basis of possession charges versus caucasian users for far too long.” “This is despite the folks that white folks and black folks are using cannabis at roughly the same rate. You can’t tell me that it’s not a social justice and social equity issue.”

According to the ACLU’s data, police in North Carolina are 3.3 times more likely to arrest black people for cannabis crimes than white people. Now, Wadsworth said that she feels the issue is even more urgent with the pandemic still raging.

“Right now there are black men sitting in prison for doing something that’s legal in a propensity of other states,” she said. “And now they’re more likely to contract COVID-19.”

“A Failure of Government”

Wadsworth places the blame for this situation squarely on the shoulders of North Carolina politicians.

“It is a failure of government,” she said. “It is a failure of leadership—of both Democrats and Republicans who knew that people even in rural communities across North Carolina are in support of this and want to see this viable economic opportunity presented and made available to them.”

For Wadsworth, the issue of legalization in North Carolina holds the key to many of the state’s ills.

“I think that cannabis legalization holds so many opporunities to talk about social economic and environmental justice and to lift up communities throughout North Carolina,” she said. “I don’t know how anyone in their right mind could be against legalization.”

For more news about the [cannabis industry in North Carolina](#), stay tuned to our [Business](#) section.