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## Medical Pot Group Getting Skittish

By Olivier Uyttebrouck

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The head of New Mexico's first licensed medical marijuana dispensary says the organization is rethinking its plans to begin distributing pot in August.

Margaret Schulze, executive director of the Santa Fe Institute for Natural Medicine, said the nonprofit organization began growing marijuana in April at a Sandoval County greenhouse and planned to begin taking orders in July.

But recent news reports that publicly identified the group, combined with anxieties about the potential response of federal law enforcement officials, have organizers considering a delay in their launch schedule.

"We're all a little nervous," Schulze said Monday. "If I'm not skittish, I think I'd be pretty stupid."

Schulze said the nonprofit borrowed \$75,000 from a private lender to cover startup costs and is leasing a greenhouse under the supervision of a manager with 30 years of organic farming experience.

About 150 people certified by the Department of Health under the state's medical cannabis program have applied to the nonprofit, she said. The agency has authorized about 370 patients under the program.

The retired attorney said she asked the Department of Health to issue wallet-sized cards stating the nonprofit is licensed to dispense marijuana, but she said the card offers a "thin veil" against arrest and prosecution by federal agents.

"There's a little plastic card standing between us and the guy holding a gun and a pair of handcuffs," she said.

Attorney General Eric Holder said in March that the Justice Department would restrict enforcement to traffickers who falsely masquerade as medical dispensaries and "use medical marijuana laws as a shield."

Holder reiterated that policy last week during a visit to Albuquerque when he said federal law officers would focus on large traffickers and ignore groups "sanctioned by state law."

Holder's announcement is reassuring, Schulze said, but remains short of a guarantee.

"That policy is wonderful, but it's not a federal law," she said. Growing and distributing marijuana remains a federal felony offense, she said. "There is no federal medical marijuana law."

The New Mexico Department of Health licensed the nonprofit in March to grow and dispense marijuana under a state law that authorizes patients with certain medical conditions to buy marijuana from licensed

dispensaries. New Mexico is one of 13 states that have authorized the use of medical marijuana.

The Department of Health has refused to identify the nonprofit under rules it adopted for the program, but the organization's name is available in the application it made to the state and was included in a Santa Fe Reporter story.

Deborah Busemeyer, spokeswoman for the Health Department, said the agency has only licensed one producer so far but has received applications from 11 other groups.

Schulze predicted few other applicants would receive state licenses.

"These people may know how to grow pot, but they really don't know how to run a business with a regulatory obligation that involves patient confidentiality," she said. "That's what sets us apart."

The nonprofit has six employees, none of whom has received pay, she said. Schulze herself has agreed to serve as executive director without pay until 2010, she said.

"I didn't mean to dedicate my entire life to this," she said. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into."