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DEA reverses decision on kratom; drug stays legal for now

After massive outcry and letters from lawmakers, the agency had a change of heart.

BETH MOLE - 10/12/2016, 12:31 PM



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The Drug Enforcement Administration is withdrawing its plan to ban the opioid-like herbal drug kratom—at least for now—according to a preliminary withdrawal notice posted today.



The notice, which will appear in the Federal Registry Thursday, nixes the [agency's emergency decision](#) in late August to list kratom as a Schedule I Controlled Substance, the most restrictive category that also includes heroin and LSD. The DEA deemed the plant's use an urgent threat to public health—based on concern that it could be abused and addictive—and set the date for a ban as early as September 30. But the abrupt plan drew intense backlash from public health experts, lawmakers, and [thousands of devoted users](#), who argue that the currently unregulated herbal supplement treats chronic pain and [prevents deadly opioid addictions](#).

After the initial notice, kratom advocates swiftly organized protests, collected more than 140,000 petition signatures, and convinced more than 50 Congress members to sign letters urging the DEA to reverse course. One of the letters highlighted the ongoing, federally funded research looking at using kratom for opioid withdrawal. That research would likely be shut down by a Schedule I listing.

The September 30 listing date came and went, with kratom proponents keeping the pressure up while holding their breath. In today's withdrawal notice, DEA Acting Administrator Chuck Rosenberg noted the efforts, writing:

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Since publishing that notice, the DEA has received numerous comments from members of the public challenging the scheduling action and requesting that the agency consider those comments and accompanying information before taking further action.

The DEA will now take a more measured look at kratom using a standard (non-emergency) review. As such, the agency has opened a public comment period that will last until December 1, 2016. And it has requested that the Food and Drug Administration conduct a scientific and medical evaluation of kratom plus offer the DEA a recommendation of how it should be regulated, if at all.

Such a review might be quick because there's little data on kratom so far. Users say the plant, *Mitragyna speciosa*, a tree in the coffee family, can treat pain, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other ailments. It's known to contain the active ingredients mitragynine and 7-hydroxymitragynine, both of which can interact with opioid receptors in the brain. However, the effects on the brain are not well understood.

Nevertheless, kratom advocates are elated by today's news. A Facebook posting by the [American Kratom Association](#) today read, "WE MOVED A MOUNTAIN." But the post went on to urge advocates to keep working to ensure that the drug remains legal. "We still have A LOT of work ahead of us," the post read.

**BETH MOLE**

Beth is Ars Technica's health reporter. She's interested in biomedical research, infectious disease, health policy and law, and has a Ph.D. in microbiology.

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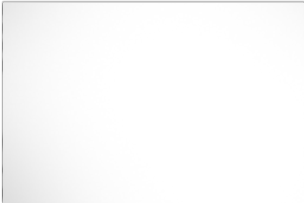


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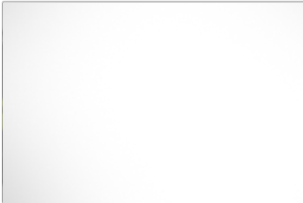


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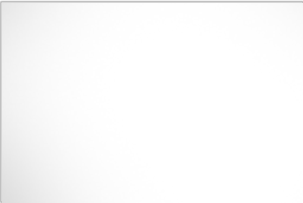
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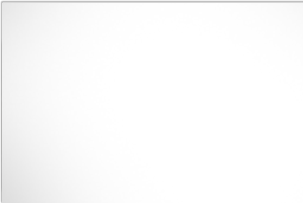
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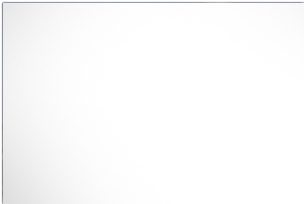
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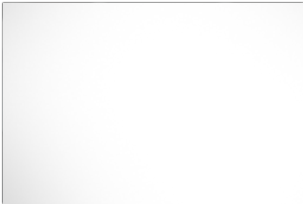
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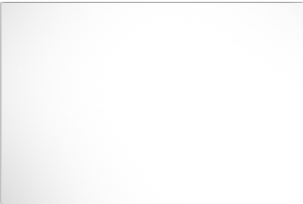
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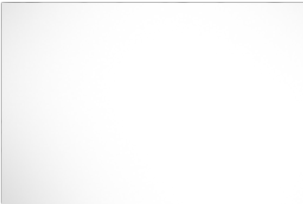
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