HolisticAlternative Recovery Trust

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Follow the Money: *New York Times* Reporting Confirms 7-OH Debate Is About Market Share, Not Public Health

HART: Science and consumer safety, not industry lobbying, should determine the future of 7-OH

WASHINGTON, D.C. - A recent New York Times investigation examining Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s approach to kratom and 7-hydroxymitragynine (7-OH) sheds new light on what HART has warned about for months: much of the campaign against 7-OH is being driven not by science or public health concerns, but by a growing battle for market share within the kratom industry itself.

"The New York Times story confirms what consumers, advocates, researchers, and others have long argued: the misinformation surrounding 7-OH, which has fueled proposed bans and scheduling efforts, was never truly about public safety. It was about money," said **Jeff Smith, Ph.D., Executive Director of HART**. "As Secretary Kennedy and federal regulators consider the future of 7-OH, they should understand that much of the pressure to ban these products is coming from competing industry interests seeking to eliminate a rival product category. Policymakers should follow the science, not the market incentives of special interest groups."

"The debate over 7-OH should be decided by science, safety data, and consumer outcomes, not by which segment of the kratom industry has the loudest lobbying operation," Smith added. "Millions of consumers remain caught in the middle as policymakers consider restrictions that could impact access to products responsible adults use for pain management, wellness, and recovery support."

The overlap between rising political funding tied to MAHA-aligned efforts and escalating attacks on 7-OH is raising red flags for consumer advocates.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

- The fight over 7-OH increasingly appears to be a battle for market share, not a public health debate.
- A **$500,000 donation** from Botanic Tonics (maker of Feel Free and a major funder of the Global Kratom Coalition) to the MAHA PAC tied to RFK Jr., the **largest contribution in the past year.**
- The donation came as federal scrutiny of 7-OH intensified and Federal cases against Feel Free were dropped.
- U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Markwayne **Mullin, who holds financial stakes in Botanic Tonics**, stood alongside federal officials when he was a U.S. Senator and advocated for federal action targeting 7-OH.
- Growing evidence of **industry-funded research, coordinated messaging, and lobbying efforts** aimed at sidelining 7-OH as a market competitor

HART's argument has been consistent for over a year: this isn't about safety, it's about **market control inside a billion-dollar industry**, with 7-OH becoming the scapegoat.

HART urges Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and federal policymakers to base decisions on scientific evidence, consumer outcomes, and product safety standards, not industry rivalries.

Consumers deserve a fair regulatory framework that protects public health while preserving access to legal products used responsibly by adults.

HART is urging lawmakers and regulators to adopt a framework that protects consumers while preserving access for responsible adults, including:

1. **Mandatory lab testing** and clear labeling of alkaloid content
2. **Age restrictions** and child-resistant packaging
3. **Manufacturing standards** and retailer accountability
4. **Targeted enforcement** against adulterated, mislabeled, or illicit products

"This is a familiar playbook," Smith added. "Control the science, control the narrative, and eliminate competition."

What is 7-Hydroxymitragynine (7-OH)?

7-hydroxymitragynine (7-OH) is a naturally occurring alkaloid found in the kratom plant. The compound has become the focus of ongoing policy debates regarding regulation, consumer access, and product safety standards.

***MYTH**: 7-OH is synthetic.*

FACT: 7-OH occurs naturally in the kratom plant in trace amounts. It is created through natural oxidation of kratom's primary alkaloid, mitragynine, and is also formed when the body metabolizes mitragynine, kratom's primary alkaloid. While a simple oxidizing process is employed to produce 7-OH at scale, it mirrors the natural process which already takes place inside the body.

***MYTH:** 7-OH is 13 times more powerful than morphine.*

FACT: This claim only applies to mice. It is not a measure of real-world use by humans.

This figure is taken out of context. It originated from an early 2004 mouse study (Matsumoto et al.) where researchers **injected** 7-hydroxymitragynine intravenously and compared its analgesic effects to morphine in animals.

That study does not reflect human use. **People do not inject 7-OH**, it is consumed orally (in tablets or sublingual forms) or produced naturally in the body when mitragynine is metabolized.

Oral pharmacology is completely different. When taken by mouth, 7-OH undergoes first-pass metabolism in the liver, which greatly reduces its potency compared to morphine. That's why toxicologists and pharmacologists stress that the "13x morphine" claim is misleading.

***MYTH**: 7-OH is an opioid like morphine, oxycodone, or fentanyl.*

FACT: Chemically, 7-OH is an alkaloid found in kratom. It is not an opioid-like morphine, oxycodone, or fentanyl. Those are derived from the opium poppy or synthesized in a lab. Kratom, by contrast, is a plant in the coffee family.

7-OH does interact with the mu-opioid receptor, the same receptor that opioids act on. However, it acts as a biased agonist. Meaning, it provides analgesic effects without triggering the full cascade of side effects that cause respiratory depression and overdose in classical opioids.

Critics may label 7-OH an "opioid" simply because it binds to opioid receptors. But medical toxicologists, like Dr. Edward Boyer, an emergency medicine physician specializing in medical toxicology, stresses that kratom and its alkaloids are pharmacologically distinct from opioids and do not carry the same overdose risks.

***MYTH**: 7-OH causes fatal overdoses.*

FACT: There are no confirmed deaths from 7-OH consumed in isolation. Over 2 billion servings have been consumed by Americans and there are zero reported deaths attributed to 7-OH used alone. A 2018 Department of Defense study confirmed that 7-OH does not cause respiratory depression.

More than one million people have consumed two billion servings of 7-OH. After two billion servings consumed, the FDA's Adverse Event Reporting System shows around 100 adverse events resulting from 7-OH consumption (or one adverse event per every 20 million servings consumed), with 12 associated deaths reported. A closer look reveals that nearly all 12 deaths involved polysubstance use – or, in two cases, predated the availability of 7-OH products on the market altogether. Because 7-OH is produced naturally in the body after ingesting kratom, every deceased kratom consumer will have 7-OH in their system.

7-OH's low mortality is explained by its pharmacology. 7-OH is a partial agonist at the mu-opioid receptor. Although 7-OH binds with high affinity, it only partially activates the receptor – exhibiting low intrinsic efficacy (Kruegel, 2016; Obeng, 2021; Todd, 2020; Varadi, 2016; & WHO, 2021). This partial agonism results in a ceiling effect on opioid-like outcomes and significantly reduces β-arrestin-2 recruitment – the signaling pathway associated with respiratory depression and other adverse effects of conventional opioids (Samways, 2024; Todd, 2020). This important fact differentiates 7-OH from opioid analgesics, and it directly contradicts assertions that 7-OH is "more potent than morphine" (Chiang et al., 2025).

About the Holistic Alternative Recovery Trust (HART)

The Holistic Alternative Recovery Trust (HART) is a national nonprofit dedicated to promoting evidence-based, transparent policy around natural recovery compounds. HART supports responsible regulation that protects consumers while encouraging innovation in safe, science-driven alternatives to traditional pharmaceuticals.

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