‘Synthetic Marijuana’ Chemicals Ban

By JESSE McKINLEY

SAN FRANCISCO — Reacting to what it called complaints from law enforcement and a surge in medical emergencies, the Drug Enforcement Administration said on Wednesday that it would ban several chemicals used to make so-called synthetic marijuana products, which resemble herbs or potpourri but mimic the effects of the drug when smoked.

In a notice published in the Federal Register, the agency said it would use its emergency powers to ban possession and sale of five synthetic cannabinoids whose effects mirror that of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, which gives marijuana its potency. Those chemicals are used to coat a variety of products which are marketed as incense, but have become popular as smokables for those seeking a legal high.

Under the action, the five cannabinoids will be listed as Schedule I substances, the most restrictive category, for at least a year while the government studies whether they should be permanently banned.

The temporary action will take at least 30 days to take effect, meaning the products will not immediately be illegal. But on Wednesday, the acting agency administrator, Michele M. Leonhart, made it clear that she believes they are an imminent public safety threat.

“Makers of these harmful products mislead their customers into thinking that ‘fake pot’ is a harmless alternative to illegal drugs, but that is not the case,” she said in a statement.

The products, which began to appear in the United States in 2008, are sold in smoke shops and online under names like K2, Blue Dragon and Black Mamba Spice, and are marked with warnings saying “not intended for human consumption.” But according to the drug agency, those warnings are being ignored, leading to a variety of bad reactions, including agitation, vomiting, seizures and hallucinations.

Tony Newman, a spokesman for the Drug Policy Alliance, which seeks to liberalize the drug laws, said the ban seemed to be the wrong approach.

“The D.E.A. says that prohibiting synthetic marijuana will ‘control’ it — yet we know from history that prohibition is the complete opposite of drug control,” Mr. Newman said, adding that regulating and setting age limits would be a better approach than “relegating it to the black market.”

Fifteen states have sought to control the THC-like chemicals, the drug agency said. But the products are still easily available; one online retailer on Wednesday was advertising Blue Dragon as “perfect for someone who gets drug tested and doesn’t want to test positive.” And, on Polk Street in San Francisco a packet of three grams of K2 was bought for $25.