

The Comeback Crop: What Industrial Hemp Means for American Agriculturists

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Just beneath the war on drugs lies a dormant, billion-dollar industry—an agricultural product with a plethora of uses (Clausen, 2017b). While marijuana has garnered plenty of attention in recent years, from Colorado to Washington and California, the *Cannabis* genus has so much more to offer than its controversial past.

Often confused with marijuana, *Cannabis sativa* is the primary source of industrial hemp. Though it bears the *Cannabis* name, it contains too little THC to cause a high and is instead harvested for its fiber, grain, and oil. After decades suppressed by the war on drugs, hemp is making a comeback in the American agriculture industry, and its impact could be huge (Schultz, 2017).

Hemp's history in America dates back to the original colonies, farmed nearly 400 years ago in the Jamestown settlement. Over the following three centuries, hemp saw intermittent production as a specialty cash crop used for rope and other fiber products. The Declaration of Independence was written on hemp paper; Abraham Lincoln lit the White House with hemp seed oil, and George Washington even farmed small amounts of hemp on his plantation (Ayers, 2016; "George Washington," n.d.).

It wasn't until the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 that the hemp industry began its decline, an inadvertent victim of the government's drug crackdown (Dvorak 2004). By 1958, Wisconsin, once a leading producer of industrial hemp, ceased production entirely. Add to that the Controlled Substance Act of 1970, prohibiting all forms of Cannabis, and the hemp industry was truly dead (Clausen, 2017a, p.8).

It *was* dead, but with the 2014 Farm Bill, the federal government opted to allow limited industrial hemp once again (Clausen, 2017b). Hemp's comeback is just beginning, as more than

30 states have already taken steps to carefully re-establish this crop, effectively seeking to build a new industry from the ground up. Of course, such efforts wouldn't be underway if not for hemp's variety of uses and products.

Before its decline, hemp played an integral role in the Revolutionary War, and propaganda featuring the "Hemp for Victory" slogan demonstrated the crop's role in World War II, as the government urged farmers nationwide to grow hemp. Even as it was being phased out, hemp was a crop of significance (Ayers, 2016; "Hemp for Victory," 2010).

In the modern day, hemp is an incredibly diverse crop. It's more efficient than cotton in textile production, and when used for paper, hemp's one-year growth cycle is much more appealing than trees' years of slow growth. Hemp's fiber also provides opportunity for innovation in material science, as it has a history of use in extremely strong industrial materials. That alone makes for an impressive crop, and its grain and oils only add to the appeal (Kilham, 2012).

For all its potential, the hemp industry currently faces some significant challenges. Because the industry didn't exist for 60 years, processing facilities and other infrastructure are a work in progress, and few in the U.S. are very familiar with the crop. Hemp's learning curve, though not very steep, is still an obstacle to overcome.

Additionally, not all in government are on board with hemp. The Wisconsin Department of Justice just recently put a damper on Wisconsin's new pilot program, when it announced it will prosecute the harvest of CBD, hemp's most valuable oil, only to reverse that decision a few weeks later, and federal courts have upheld the Drug Enforcement Administration's strict

policies on hemp (“Hemp Industry,” 2018; Richmond, 2018; “State AG Says,” 2018, p. 4). Four years after receiving the “green light” from Congress, hemp’s legality is still in flux.

Despite such uncertainty, rapid progress is being made. The Kentucky Department of Agriculture’s pilot program began with just 33 planted acres in 2014, and last year, it boasted more than 3,000, a growth of 10,000% in just three years. Kentucky is just one example of hemp’s potential to disrupt American agriculture for the better, as numerous other states are implementing similar systems (“Industrial Hemp,” n.d.).

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also recently gave hemp a significant boost. In June, the FDA approved Epidiolex, a hemp-based drug used to treat certain epileptic seizures. Besides demonstrating another use for the crop, this decision will also require hemp to be reclassified by the DEA, paving the way for hemp’s speedy return (Keown, 2018).

Even if the industry is still taking shape, the machinery necessary to harvest the crop for grain and oil is already readily available. According to Ken Anderson, founder of Legacy Hemp in Prescott, Wisconsin, hemp can be farmed with the same equipment used for corn and soybeans (Clausen, 2017b). This makes it easy and economical for farmers to try hemp through pilot programs or add hemp to crop rotations when the market makes sense, and that market appears quite strong.

With Americans importing more than 600 million dollars in hemp products from Canada in 2015, the market already exists, and this number is expected to double in the next couple of years. Groups like Legacy Hemp are already working to provide growers with contracts to guarantee a sale of their crop, and the market holds great profit potential—upwards of \$250 per

acre (Clausen, 2017b; Fine, 2014). Some farms are already seeing substantial profits, and this will inevitably continue as infrastructure improves to match (Bennett, 2017).

So where does hemp go from here? Pilot programs currently aim to address farmers' concerns by carefully building up this new industry, and full legalization, beyond pilot programs, will eventually require Congress's involvement. At the same time, hemp's diverse set of uses and excellent economic potential may provide all the momentum necessary to expedite this process. Hundreds of interested growers are taking an active role in this process, and multiple pieces of legislation that would completely remove hemp from the Controlled Substances Act have strong bipartisan support. If Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer can find common ground, it must be a no-brainer (Angell, 2018).

Hemp is poised to become agriculture's comeback kid, which agriculturists should embrace. It's profitable without subsidies, and as a crop-of-all-trades, it provides significant room for innovation. Agriculture rarely sees new crops, but hemp is something special, presenting a great opportunity for agriculturists nationwide.

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