

Here Comes Hemp

Jan 13, 2019 By Rene Ray De La Cruz, Staff Writer

Victorville **DAILY**  **PRESS**

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**John Miller talks about the potential economic impact of federally legalized hemp in Lucerne Valley CA on Tuesday January 8, 2019.
[James Quigg, Daily Press]**

LUCERNE VALLEY — Hemp fields could pop up across San Bernardino County thanks to state legislation authored by State Sen. Scott Wilk last year and complemented by recently passed federal legislation.

Industry leaders say the new legalization pulled hemp out of decades-long federal prohibition purgatory and could unleash an economic boom for California and for farmers in agricultural areas such as Lucerne Valley, Newberry Springs and El Mirage.

“This is the biggest thing to hit the U.S. market in terms of value,” said John Miller, 46, a land appraiser and co-partner of Custom Spectrum Inc., a company that focuses on the extraction and isolation of cannabinoids from hemp. “This has the potential of quickly becoming a billion dollar industry.”

Cannabinoids are the chemical compounds like THC and CBD that are secreted by cannabis flowers, which many claim provide medicinal benefits.

The federal law removes hemp and hemp derivatives from the Controlled Substances Act and legally separates it from cannabis. It also places the plant under the supervision of the Department of Agriculture.

Industry experts believe the Farm Bill’s passage also allows consumers anywhere in the U.S. to legally buy CBD-based products if they’re created from low- or zero-THC hemp. The FDA stated that hemp-based CBD products that are billed as having therapeutic benefits or as a dietary supplement are illegal to sell unless they are FDA reviewed and approved.

A former deputy with the Modoc County Sheriff’s Department, Miller sides with Fortune, which said the U.S. cannabis/hemp industry could grow to \$20 billion by 2022, up from \$800 million last year.

With the growing acceptance of hemp, Miller believes the High Desert could see farmers “growing thousands of acres of hemp for companies who are listed on the New York Stock Exchange.”

Last month, BNN Bloomberg reported that the Coca-Cola Co. was in talks with Aurora Cannabis Inc. to develop cannabis-infused drinks and Molson Coors Brewing Company announced it plans to launch its own CBD line of beverages.

In October, Gov. Jerry Brown signed Wilk’s Senate Bill 1409, which updates the state’s current law and gives the green light for cultivators in California to begin growing hemp for commercial and industrial uses.

New legislation signed last year by President Donald Trump lifted the decades-long prohibition on domestic, commercial hemp production. The provisions included within the “Farm Bill,” or Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, went into effect on New Year’s Day.

The new federal law does not fully legalize cannabis but does legalize strains with low THC, the main psychoactive compound found in marijuana. The bill defines hemp as any part or derivative of cannabis with a THC level below 0.3 percent on a dry-weight basis.



John Miller shows off hemp seeds in Lucerne Valley CA on Tuesday January 8, 2019. The 2019 farm bill federally legalizes growing hemp, causing a boom for agriculture zones in California. [James Quigg, Daily Press]

Hemp has been grown for centuries, with the plant being used for its fiber, seeds and cannabinoid oils. The international market has estimated there are more than 25,000 products used for hemp including food, nutritional supplements, cosmetics, paper, fabrics and construction and insulation materials.

During a visit to the Daily Press offices last year, Wilk said the reason he authored the Senate bill was to assist Antelope Valley farmers and to attract manufacturers to the High Desert.

Wilk said California represents the largest consumer market for hemp materials in the nation, adding that the bill enables farmers to diversify their operations, conserve valuable water resources and create thousands of jobs.

Miller said an acre of hemp could fetch at least \$20,000 an acre, with current market trends pushing that figure beyond \$50,000 per acre, “so don’t be surprised when you see local pistachio and alfalfa farmers switching their fields over to hemp this year.”

“An alfalfa farm of 160 acres takes fewer people to manage than hemp,” Miller said. “You’ll need about 15 employees to manage 20 acres of hemp that will be grown for CBD. So you can see how this is going to generate a lot of jobs.

“Hemp cultivation has been approved by the feds, it’s legal as corn and tomatoes,” Miller said. “The agriculture commission in each state will set guidelines for farmers. If the county tries to stop them, they’ll have to deal with the feds.”

Attorney Pamela Epstein, the owner of Green Wise Consulting out of Los Angeles, told the Daily Press she expects the hemp market to exceed cannabis sales by “two-to-one” in the next two to five years.

“It’s going to take time for this unholy union of cannabis and hemp to be accepted,” said Epstein, who worked with cannabis supporters in the High Desert as they pleaded local municipalities to craft cannabis ordinances. “It’s going to take time for the hemp industry to develop, we still need to wait for the Industrial Hemp Advisory Board to work through its regulatory process.”

The California Department of Food and Agriculture is expected to finalize its hemp regulations and begin the process of accepting applications and licenses for commercial ventures sometime this year. The California Department of Food and Agriculture will receive the applications and issue the licenses.

Epstein said she’s interested in the advisory board’s testing protocol to ensure the hemp plants contain less than 0.3 percent THC and how they will handle a crop that exceeds the limit.

Since hemp is genetically related to marijuana, Epstein and Miller said some authorities may find it difficult to distinguish between a mature crop of cannabis and marijuana.

“The San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department really needs to get a handle on this industry,” Miller said. “The last thing we need are farms being raided for growing legal crops.”

***Reporter Rene Ray De La Cruz may be reached at 760-951-6227,
RDeLaCruz@VVDailyPress.com, Twitter [@DP_ReneDeLaCruz](https://twitter.com/DP_ReneDeLaCruz)***