

Push is on for Hemp Farming

But federal obstacles remain

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HANFORD — With all the focus on Proposition 64's legalization of recreational pot, many people didn't notice a section of the new law that legalizes something else: industrial hemp.

Hemp, which is a variety of cannabis without the mind-altering properties usually associated with marijuana, was grown like any other agricultural crop in the 1940s to supply material such as rope and clothing for World War II.

But since 1957, it's been declared illegal by the federal government.

Local hemp advocates hope that in [the wake of Prop. 64](#), large fields of the tall, leafy stalks will appear in Kings County.

"Industrial hemp is one of the main reasons I really wanted to push for Prop. 64," said Hanford resident Brian Neves Jr. "I think that hemp has so many practical uses. There's almost a countless variety [of products] that hemp can be turned into."

Neves Jr. said biodegradable hemp bags could replace plastic bags and produce an environmental benefit.

Neves Jr. thinks hemp could be a valuable cash crop for local farmers facing high groundwater pumping costs.

"I think it would revitalize the agricultural industry here in our area," he said. "I think a lot of farmers should be looking toward hemp."

"We are discussing this topic as an organization but have not finalized our position at this time, so I can't comment yet," said Dustin Ference, executive director of the Kings County Farm Bureau.

Stratford farmer Charles Meyer said he wanted to try hemp farming for years, but said he ran into too many regulatory roadblocks.

"It would be a good product," Meyer said. "Anything that you can make out of wood or oil can be made with industrial hemp."

The situation with industrial hemp in California is complicated.

A law called the [Industrial Hemp Farming Act](#) which took effect in 2013 seemed to clear the way for farmers to plant fields of the crop, but the fine print of the legislation included a requirement that a new state hemp-growing permitting agency had to be authorized “under federal law.”

The [2014 federal Farm Bill](#) allows hemp cultivation but limits it to university-sanctioned research projects and experimental programs conducted by the state department of agriculture.

Last year, California Attorney General Kamala Harris issued a legal opinion affirming those restrictions.

Meyer said he contacted officials at California State University, Fresno, and California State University, Bakersfield, to see if they were interested in working with him on a hemp-growing project.

He said they weren't.

“It should be treated like wheat, or cotton, or any other crop,” he said. “Any regulations for industrial hemp are not worth fooling with. I wash my hands of the whole bunch of them.”

However, some observers think the current situation under federal law is bound to change in the wake of Prop. 64.

Bay Area consultant Brian Webster, who has advised businesses and organizations on cannabis-related issues, thinks other states will follow California's example and legalize pot, thereby putting increasing pressure on the feds to take a more hands-off approach.

“Because of Prop. 64, the political situation has changed,” Webster said. “If [recreational] marijuana is legal in California, why would anybody be persecuted for growing hemp?”

Because Prop. 64 allows people to grow up to six cannabis plants for personal use, Webster said he's advising residents and growers to plant six industrial hemp plants on their property.

Webster thinks that at some point, farmers will start growing it in large plots without any federal action being taken against them.

“[Meyer's] best hope is that 1,000 or 10,000 or 100,000 people in California start growing six hemp plants in their backyard,” Webster said.

Neves Jr. said it bothered him to think that Meyer gave up because of regulatory obstacles.

“It's sad,” Neves Jr. said. “It has so much more potential. It really upsets me when I think about hemp and its many benefits.”

“They're growing it in Europe and Canada,” Meyer said. “It may eventually take off if it gets started in the U.S.”



Charles Meyer



Hanford resident and industrial hemp advocate Brian Neves Jr.

The upshot

- Local advocates and at least one Kings County farmer would like to see industrial hemp grown in local fields, but state and federal regulatory obstacles remain.

"It would be a good product. Anything that you can make out of wood or oil can be made with industrial hemp."

— Stratford farmer Charles Meyer

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