

Congress warms up to research on hemp

By Rob Hotakainen, McClatchy Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON — Hemp is a big winner in the new farm bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday. While Congress has shown little interest in legalizing marijuana, members are warming up to industrial hemp, pot’s nonintoxicating sister plant.

For the first time, the farm bill would allow nine states – including Kentucky and California – to use hemp for research and academic purposes. After two years of feuding over food stamps and farm subsidies, the House voted 251-166 to pass the sweeping bill, sending it to the Senate for a final vote later this week. It would then go to President Barack Obama to sign.

Legalizing hemp, even on a limited basis, would give new ammunition to pro-marijuana supporters, who want to scrap the federal ban against pot. Both are classified as controlled substances, long prohibited by Congress.

Craig Lee, a board member of the Kentucky Hemp Growers Cooperative Association in Lexington, predicted that the measure will be the first step toward full legalization of hemp, ultimately providing a big boost for the economy.“

Five years from now, if the hemp industry goes the way that it should go, it could create thousands and thousands of jobs,” Lee said.

Growing hemp in the U.S.

The farm bill would allow state departments of agriculture and universities to grow hemp for academic research and marketing purposes in nine states that have voted to make cultivation legal.

States allowed to grow hemp



Hemp vs. marijuana

- Plants are the same species, Cannabis sativa, but different varieties
- Hemp has a small trace of THC, marijuana’s main psychoactive chemical
- Marijuana refers to the flowering tops and leaves of cannabis varieties with THC levels of 10 percent or more
- Different growing methods used for hemp and marijuana

Nearly \$500 million Retail value of U.S. hemp products in 2012 from hemp imported from countries where it is legal to grow; includes food, cosmetics, clothing, auto parts, building materials

Source: Vote Hemp, Congressional Research Service
 Graphic: Judy Treible

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The farm bill would allow state departments of agriculture, colleges and universities to grow hemp for academic, research and marketing purposes in states that have voted to make cultivation legal.

Besides California and Kentucky, the measure would apply to Colorado, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Vermont and West Virginia, said Tom Murphy, the national outreach coordinator for Vote Hemp, an organization that backs legalization.

He said the states would have to design regulations for their pilot programs and then register and certify all growing sites.

The legislation drew backing from lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle, from conservative Republicans such as Kentucky Sens. Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul to liberals such as Colorado Democratic Rep. Jared Polis. The American Farm Bureau added its muscle to the cause earlier this month, passing a resolution that urged declassifying hemp as a controlled substance. Hemp is used in a wide array of products, including food, clothing, body-care products and construction materials. Growers say the industry has more than \$500 million in annual retail sales.

But while it's legal to buy and sell hemp products, it's illegal to grow and cultivate the crop.

That's meant more business for Canada, where cultivation is legal.

David Bronner, for example, who heads Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps in California, imports more than 20 tons of hemp oil from Canada farmers each year, using it in his company's line of natural soaps. Bronner has emerged as one of the biggest advocates of legalizing hemp, getting arrested in 2012 when he locked himself in a steel-bar cage in front of the White House and began using a press to extract fresh oil from 12 hemp plants. Lee said it was time for the federal government to remove the barriers that hemp growers faced and for authorities to stop "beating these plants down and burning them and killing them."

"We're going to start the education process now," Lee said. "It's become more legal. People will feel more free about it."

Not everyone. Last week, Michele Leonhart, the head of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and an Obama appointee, drew heat when she told a national sheriff's group that the low point of her 33-year career came last July 4, when a hemp flag flew over the U.S. Capitol. Her comments, first reported by the Boston Herald, set off a firestorm.

Lee was incredulous: "What is the matter with this woman? These are the people that the taxpayers of this country are paying."

Polis, a backer of hemp and marijuana legalization who arranged to fly the flag, called the DEA chief "shockingly out of touch." He said industrial hemp had no significant drug content and noted that even the first American flag, created by Betsy Ross, was made from hemp."

Many of the founding fathers, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, grew hemp, and some of the first American flags were made of hemp,” Polis said in a statement. “Is Michele Leonhart embarrassed by Betsy Ross, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington?”

The DEA didn’t respond to a request for comment. While hemp was once widely grown in the United States, beginning in the Colonial days, its relationship to marijuana helped lead to the demise of commercial production in 1958, according to researchers at the University of Kentucky.

Law-enforcement officials have long complained that marijuana and hemp look so much alike that they can be distinguished only by chemical analysis. Both come from the same species, *Cannabis sativa*. But hemp has only a trace of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the chemical that produces a high.

A report last year by the Congressional Research Service said marijuana growers didn’t want their crops near hemp fields because the hemp could pollinate the female marijuana plants. That would result in a harvest that’s seedy and lower in THC, degrading the pot’s value, the report said.

Kevin Sabet, the director of the University of Florida Drug Policy Institute and a former adviser on drug issues for Obama, said people could easily grow marijuana and hide it under the guise of hemp, frustrating law-enforcement efforts.“

This is purely a political move to further a pro-marijuana agenda,” Sabet said. “It has little to do with actually farming hemp, since the demand for that is so low. But in some states that need help on the job front, it’s good politics to claim that allowing this will create jobs. The sad truth is that it will do no such thing.”

Hemp advocates say it’s wrong to assume that allowing more hemp research will advance the cause of marijuana legalization.

Murphy, of Vote Hemp, called it a “meme” reinforced by the news media and drug-enforcement officials.“

They are separate issues,” he said. “They are just linked in the minds of some editors and the DEA. Congress has figured out the difference.”

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