



# Hemp no panacea for farmers

ANYONE WHO THINKS THAT HEMP is a quick way to pull American agriculture out of its current funk had better think again.

Since the 2018 farm bill legalized the growing of hemp, a nonpsychoactive relative of marijuana in the cannabis family, farmers have been wildly enthusiastic about its potential. They see markets ranging from rope and clothing to hemp oils that are being sold for their supposed medicinal qualities, even though the Food and Drug Administration has not yet formally regulated them.

There aren't any official acreage statistics yet, but the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture has said farmers "quadrupled" the land devoted to hemp this year in hopes that the crop will improve their incomes at a time when the prices of traditional commodities are low.

On Tuesday, Farm Credit Administration Chairman Glen Smith told the House Agriculture Committee that he was "excited" there was a new crop and that the rise of hemp reminded him of the transformation of soybeans into a major commodity when he was a young farmer in Iowa in the 1980s. Since the farm bill removed hemp from the list of controlled substances, farm-credit institutions can make loans on it, but Smith noted that he has warned the lending institutions they should make sure there is a market for the hemp.

"Just like any new crop, there is inherent risk," Smith said. Indeed, there may be many more challenges than either growers or Congress first realized.

There seems to be no precedent for the introduction of legal hemp. It took centuries for soybeans to be recognized as a major protein source, but growing it was never illegal.

When members of the Hemp Federation of America, one of several new hemp associations, came to Washington last week for their first fly-in to meet with Agriculture Department officials and members of Congress, their list of issues was long and did not always include specific solutions.

Scott Graves, the Washington lobbyist who formed the federation, described the meetings as "much more conversational rather than specific demands." The growers and crop insurers who traveled to Washington said they found that USDA civil servants and Capitol Hill aides want to help the industry, but the crop is so new they will rely on farmers to discover the issues that need to be addressed and to propose solutions.

The core problem with hemp is that growing it in the United States was illegal for most of the 20th century, ex-

cept for a brief period during World War II when it could not be imported and was needed for ship's rigging.

The result is that everything surrounding hemp lags behind other crops, beginning with research into seeds and market information. Kelly Deterding, a crop insurer from Lubbock, Texas, noted that growers need to be sure agencies recognize that hemp is no longer an illegal product.

As required under the farm bill, the USDA has issued a draft rule to encourage hemp production. The rule includes provisions for farmers to report production to the department, but it says that the hemp must be tested in a Drug Enforcement Administration-approved laboratory to determine that its THC level is not above 0.3 percent,

which would be considered marijuana and a controlled substance at the federal level. Farmers are supposed to dispose of any hemp whose THC is too high.

The text notes that "nothing in this rule prohibits the interstate commerce of hemp," but there is no easy-to-use test for THC, and there are reports of truck drivers being arrested because state patrol officers think hemp is marijuana. Farmers are also worried they will have to destroy crops contaminated from either wild marijuana, or in some states, legal marijuana production.

With no pesticides authorized to prevent weeds, hemp requires hand-weeding. That means more labor, but Derek Azevedo, a Los Banos, California grower, said he is worried that after he registers his farm for production, his workers may find authorities questioning their green-card status on the basis of their working in a drug-related enterprise.

Congress and the USDA also require states to establish their own regulations for growing hemp and registering farms. The industry is hoping that the state regulations are similar, but it notes that one governor so far, South Dakota's Kristi Noem, is opposing the licensing of hemp farms.

Hemp farmers are already eligible for what's known as "whole farm" crop insurance, but Mike Gaynier, a Michigan crop insurer, said growers need hemp-specific policies that cannot be developed until there are production statistics.

Jeff McVey, an Oklahoma farmer, said conditions are so bad that farmers are searching for "a better way" to make a living, but these problems have to be addressed before farmers realize hemp's potential. □



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