

A few miles south of Wheatland lies the wheat field I own, acquired a few years ago in part to winter grazing for my sons' cow herd. Since then I've discovered the crop production to be marginal; in discussion with my banker it transpired that his father's field in Montana produces almost twice the number of bushels per acre. Only a smidgen of the income finds its way into my pocket as revenue; the producer gets the lion's share, since he does the work of planting and harvesting, not to mention maintaining expensive equipment and footing the fuel bill. Further diminishing my returns is costly hail insurance, which I've had to take out owing to shifting climate patterns. Hence I have cast about for an alternative crop. What about hemp?

“What do the first Gutenberg bible, Christopher Columbus's ropes and sails, the Declaration of Independence, and the first American flag have in common? All were made from hemp.” So reads a passage in the 2009 Earth Talk publication. Hemp is a renewable and easy-to-grow crop, the passage goes on, tough enough to substitute for paper or wood yet malleable enough to be made into clothing, even into “biodegradable forms of plastic.” Forefathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson once earned a living growing and selling hemp. More recently, in World War II the crop proved of such importance, “the U.S. government provided farmers with subsidies to convert fields to hemp cultivation.”

This being so, why is hemp production today outlawed by federal regulation? Environmentalists and farmers alike appreciate hemp as an alternative to cotton for clothes and trees for paper, Earth Talk goes on to say. “Unlike cotton, hemp does not require large doses of pesticides and herbicides, as it is naturally resistant to pests and grows fast, crowding out weeds.” To make paper, the article explains, requires that trees must grow for many years. A field of hemp, on the other hand, is harvested in a few months and “over a few decades will make four times as much paper as a similarly sized forest. . . . making paper from hemp uses only a fraction of the chemicals required to turn trees into paper.”

In 1970, perhaps in response to the “make love not war” movement, the U.S. congress designated hemp, “along with its relative marijuana” a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act, even though industrial hemp does not contain enough psychoactive ingredients to make a smoker “high.” Lately the European Union and Canada have had a hay day producing hemp and selling its products in the United States. “With their American competition out of the running, Canadian farmers have been reaping hemp's financial rewards . . . in 2005, the Canadian hemp industry tripled the amount of acreage dedicated to the crop.” It's true that in the hippie era, various European countries as well as Canada similarly enacted laws outlawing the crop, but these have since been repealed.

Ron Paul, the 2008 presidential candidate from Texas, recently introduced a hemp farming bill into Congress, says Earth Talk; it stalled due to “opposition from the DEA and the White House” in the name of the war on drugs. The crop, DEA maintains, would allow farmers to disguise growing cannabis with similar-looking hemp plants. It's enough to make me wish I lived back in the days—although, come to think of it, in Washington's or Jefferson's time I would not have been allowed to own this parcel of land, not even in Wyoming, the “Equality State” that gave women the right to vote in 1869, ahead of everyone else. As Rodger McDaniel points out in a recent Wyoming TribuneEagle column, the men striving for Wyoming statehood did so not out of any expansive commitment to the rights of women but for practical considerations: they needed X number of votes and could attain these only by including women. The Wyoming

legislature “didn’t even ratify the 19th Amendment until 26 other states had done so,” writes McDaniel.

I’d love to grow hemp; undoubtedly my producer would also, but ah, the wheels of government! For now I’ll urge our legislators to support Ron Paul's farm bill. Indeed, farmers have intensified their lobbying efforts to lift the U.S. ban, and many state legislatures have passed laws authorizing hemp research and/or making hemp farming legal if the U.S. government will allow it. These states include Arkansas, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Montana, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.