

Column of January 30, 2014. Editor's Headline: "The Unjust War on Hemp"

Nine years ago I put my savings into a wheat-producing field south of Wheatland that seemed a promising investment. Unfortunately, production has been on the decline and now, the field lies fallow.

Wyoming's high-plains location marks it as one of the driest states in the union. Weather instability brought on by climate change makes the already-sparse rainfall even less dependable. Some Wyoming farmers plant irrigated crops, but that's like borrowing from Peter to pay Paul: Once an aquifer is depleted, that's it for groundwater supplies.

Hence I've set my sights on raising hemp, a fast-growing crop that requires no irrigation and no fertilizer. One acre of hemp can produce 3 to 10 tons of biomass every four months of growing season. Hemp is cheap to tend, doesn't need pesticides, is actually good for the soil, is heartier than most similar plants, and is the strongest natural fiber in the world.

Problem is, until Wyoming decriminalizes marijuana, hemp can't be grown here. Because the plant is in the cannabis family, it's classified as a drug banned under the federal Controlled Substances Act. Yet industrial hemp contains less than 0.3% THC, while marijuana typically has 5-25% THC (delta-9-TetraHydroCannabinol, the psychoactive substance in marijuana).

Oddly, the U.S. is the only industrialized country that bans hemp while consuming the world's largest volume of hemp products. According to an industry association, total sales of products containing hemp are estimated to be around \$450 million. Australians and Canadians use hemp domestically and export it as food, animal feed, and biofuel. A few years ago a "Hemp Car" toured the U.S., logging thousands of miles on hemp biofuel at 27 mpg. "Hemp 4 Fuel" shows the car on youtube.

During a recent sojourn in California I visited a Whole Foods Market to check out its numerous—and pricey—hemp-based products. I found hemp milk, hemp cooking oil, hemp protein powder, hemp nuts, hemp granola, and a variety of hemp-based beauty products. Every label indicated that the product came from Canada, including the base product for the hemp milk that's produced in Oregon.

George Washington grew hemp as his primary crop at Mount Vernon. Thomas Jefferson grew the plant as a secondary crop at Monticello; he urged farmers to grow hemp in lieu of tobacco. Benjamin Franklin used it as the raw material to start one of America's pioneering paper mills.

Hemp was called "a billion dollar crop" in the February 1938 edition of Popular Mechanics, which noted that hemp "is used to produce more than 5,000 textile products, ranging from rope to fine laces, and the woody 'hurds' remaining after the fiber has been removed contain more than 77% cellulose that can be used to produce more than 25,000 products, from dynamite to Cellophane."

But lobbying by giant corporations invested in petroleum/plastics, paper, and pharmaceuticals, rigged the game. Newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who owned vast tracts of

timber, wanted no competition from the lowly hemp. When the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) declared hemp a controlled substance, the agency did the lobbyists' bidding.

Then came the war on ditchweed through the DEA's Domestic Cannabis Eradication and Suppression Program (DCE/SP). Overly burdensome on taxpayers, the program is harmful to the health and safety of residents, not to mention the damage inflicted on the environment. Ditchweed plants present no threat to public safety, do not contribute to the black-market marijuana trade, and, hence, should not be targeted by eradication efforts. But tell that to the agency! In 1996 alone, the DEA spent over \$9 million on marijuana eradication efforts in all 50 states. This figure does not include the cost of state and local participation.

"This program is a waste of taxpayer's money," writes an observer. "The DEA should focus its efforts on meaningful drug eradication, not on methods designed to make it seem as if the agency were doing something. Time to reallocate this law enforcement money. What we currently have amounts to consumer fraud. The agents misrepresent what they're doing."

After decades of DEA folly, the American Farm Bureau in 1996 unanimously approved a resolution for farmers to plant test plots of hemp for research purposes. Then a coalition of business and agricultural organizations wishing to grow hemp filed a formal petition with the DEA and the USDA. Kentucky legislators approved growing hemp in 2013, yet later that year, its state police vowed to resume its annual fly-over "eradication" campaign. "Last year we eradicated \$44,000 illegal marijuana plants and arrested 524 people," boasted Police Commissioner Rodney Brewer. Kentucky once was the nation's top hemp-producing state: in 1838, rope and bagging factories in Lexington alone employed 1,000 workers.

When Colorado voters decriminalized marijuana in 2012, farmers planted small, experimental plots of hemp. The DEA chose not to respond, and so, Colorado farmers are acting more decisively now. An NPR report highlighted Michael Bowman in Wray, a small town on the eastern Colorado plains. In spring 2014, Mr. Bowman will plant 100 acres of hemp on his farm and turn his first crop into edible oil. (I think I'll pay a visit to the Bowman farm.)

"As plants, marijuana and hemp look related, and they are," notes NPR. "But while marijuana is bred to get its users high, hemp is all business—grown for food and other everyday uses."