

Industrial Hemp Growth In Oregon Faces Challenges

ALBANY, Ore. (AP) —Despite recent approval from state lawmakers, industrial hemp growth in Oregon faces a number of hurdles, including a less than ideal local climate and likely opposition from the Drug Enforcement Agency, an Oregon State University official said.

Hemp and its close cousin, marijuana, were outlawed by the federal government in the 1930s. But Oregon will become one of a handful of states to give farmers the option of growing it when the new law — signed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski on Tuesday — takes effect Jan. 1.

Hemp contains high fiber, protein and fatty acids, and can be used to make food or industrial materials like paper. But it falls under federal anti-drug rules because it has trace amounts of the mind-altering chemical THC that is found in marijuana.

The legislation requires industrial hemp to have very low levels of THC, and the law also redefines "marijuana" and "controlled substance" under Oregon law to further distinguish industrial hemp.

The DEA has put restrictions on hemp research, said Mark Mellbye of Oregon State University.

And the agency has shut down growing operations in other states that have legalized hemp, and prevented the Lakota Sioux tribe in South Dakota from growing it on sovereign land, said Daryl Ehrensing of Oregon State's Crop and Soil Science Department.

Whether the agency cracks down on any eventual Oregon growers is anybody's guess, Ehrensing said. But he said he doubts the federal government would follow Oregon in making similar changes to federal law.

"Nobody knows what the feds will do at this point," he said. "I don't think anybody's going to take a chance with forfeiting their land to the federal government."

Also, commercial growers in Oregon wouldn't be able to grow hemp on a large scale because of the dry summers that much of the state experiences, Ehrensing said.

But Ehrensing said that he's received calls from companies interested in experimenting with growing hemp. He thinks somebody may try growing hemp as early as next year.

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