

Hemp is Hot!

At a time when imported hemp is gaining popularity in the U.S.—in snack bars, protein powders, oils, milks, lip balms, soaps and clothing—there are more legal restrictions on growing it here than there are on marijuana

By **Bill Giebler**

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKAEL KENNEDY; MODEL: TAWNEY BEVACQUA

In the fall of 2016, Salt Creek Ranch's hemp crop stood tall in the field. It had been a long time coming. The prior year, the farm, which pastures animals and grows vegetables, had set aside 15 acres for a larger cash crop. Being in Colorado, they'd considered marijuana, "because everybody was making money hand over fist with marijuana," says farmer Margaret Richardson. "But when we looked into it, it really wasn't for us."

Instead they turned to marijuana's cousin, hemp, a fast-growing plant that enriches soils, sequesters carbon and calls for minimal fertilizers and pesticides. Hemp's benefits continue postharvest, where it can be made into fiber for high-tensile strength cording and clothing, beauty products, foods high in protein and essential fatty acids, non-psychoactive medicines, building materials and even a component of supercapacitor batteries.



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"There are a documented 25,000 products you can make from hemp," says Richardson who finds hemp bioplastics particularly exciting. "The fact that every bit of plastic from petroleum that's ever been made still exists, is devastating," she says. "We have to be a part of changing that. We have children we're leaving this planet to and they deserve better from us."

Richardson found that growing industrial hemp in the U.S. had its challenges, though. One was the dearth of harvesting and processing know-how since the crop had been effectively eliminated by the Marihuana (sic.) Tax Act of 1937 (and made illegal outright in 1970) until limited inclusion in the 2014 Farm Bill. While Colorado, one of 15 states growing hemp, now allows "research only" cultivation, the limitations are many, such as barring imported seed—even from other hemp-growing states. Without access to proven seed, Colorado farmers have limited resources for meeting another requirement: industrial hemp must contain less than 0.3 percent tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive compound of marijuana. "It's a bit of a catch-22," Richardson says, "because they say you can grow hemp and

give you a license to grow hemp, but you're on your own when it comes to genetics. And if your crop tests over the 0.3 percent? Sorry, you can't do anything with it!"

That's exactly what happened to Salt Creek. Just days prior to harvest, the farm received notice from the Colorado Department of Agriculture that their plants had tested at 0.49 percent. While only one-tenth of the THC level desired for recreational use, Salt Creek's first harvest was destined for the compost heap.

At a time when imported hemp is gaining popularity on U.S. grocery shelves—in the form of snack bars, protein powders, oils, milks, lip balms and soaps—Richardson ironically finds herself growing a benign crop with more legal restrictions than the narcotic relative that has kept it on the fringes for so long.

"I think it's very important to advocate for hemp on its own merits, and not talk about it as part of general marijuana reform," says David Bronner, CEO of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps. The company has been putting hemp oil in most of its products since 1999—for improved lather, rinse and moisturizing properties, and as activism against the



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drug war's "absurd and ridiculous" position on hemp as a Schedule I narcotic. THC in hemp products, says Bronner, "is no more consequential than trace opiates in a poppy seed bagel or trace alcohol in a glass of orange juice."

The next step toward hemp farming freedom is the Industrial Hemp Farming Act (IHFA). Passage would eliminate any question regarding hemp cultivation, says Colleen Keahey, executive director of the Hemp Industries Association (HIA). "It effectively would provide a new definition to distinguish hemp as an agricultural commodity and hopefully wouldn't require so much oversight."

With the Trump Administration being vocally anti-marijuana, distinction remains critical. "Without people understanding just how different genetically the two plants are," says Keahey, "the presumption has been that this is the gateway to marijuana cultivation. That is the stigma that continues to be the plight of our movement."

Yet, many are hopeful for passage of the IHFA, noting prominent Republican allies include Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and fellow Kentucky Senator

Rand Paul. "The Kentucky delegation up, down and sideways is completely pro-hemp," says Bronner. "Tobacco is going down the drain and Kentucky is the historical heartland for hemp growing in the U.S. We feel confident that this is our year."

The IHFA could hit the congressional floor at any point (though it hasn't by press time). Regardless, the HIA, along with VoteHemp, is sponsoring the eighth annual Hemp History Week (hemphistoryweek.com) beginning June 5. This year's theme, "breaking ground," will either be a celebration of passage, or a furthering of a longstanding education campaign to bring legislative freedom to a revolutionary crop.

For her part, Richardson is pushing to create a viable seed certification program (and a legal landscape that will allow it) so that farmers can be assured of consistency in growing marketable crops—and not suffer unnecessary losses like hers. "It's a tough situation," she says, "but we're not giving up."