

The Drug War's Collateral Damage: Support for Industrial Hemp Grows – Even in Congress

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Thursday, 25 July 2013 05:46

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By most standards, Jason Kakert's [Iowa Hemp for Victory page on Facebook](#) is a modest grassroots political effort. He started the page in 2011, and this week it had only 58 “likes.”

“This is just getting started out,” the 31-year-old graphic artist said last week in his studio at the Bucktown Center for the Arts. “Right now this is kind of a one-man show.”

But Kakert (a former *River Cities' Reader* intern) is an eloquent advocate for industrial hemp, and he's part of a movement that's gaining significant traction. Last month, the U.S. House – by a vote of 225 to 200 – passed an amendment to the farm bill that would allow “institutions of higher education to grow or cultivate industrial hemp for the purpose of agricultural or academic research,” [according to the amendment's summary](#) .

“The amendment only applies to [the nine] states that already permit industrial hemp growth and cultivation under state law.”

The amendment is now attached to the House-passed farm bill, but its fate is uncertain at best; the larger politics of the farm bill dwarf this particular issue.

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Yet the amendment's passage represented a major surprise victory for hemp advocates. As Tom Murphy, the national outreach coordinator and a board member of the not-for-profit organization Vote Hemp, said in an interview last week: "We were expecting a 50 to 375 defeat."

He called passage of the amendment the culmination of years of education and lobbying, and also said support was easier to garner because "it was an agricultural-research bill for higher education" instead of a more sweeping effort to legalize industrial hemp.

For the uninitiated, industrial hemp is hailed as a hardy, versatile crop. Some people claim it can literally save the world, but a more realistic, sober analysis comes from last month's Congressional Research Service report ["Hemp as an Agricultural Commodity"](#): "Some estimate that the global market for hemp consists of more than 25,000 products. ... Hemp fibers are used in a wide range of products, including fabrics and textiles, yarns and raw or processed spun fibers, paper, carpeting, home furnishings, construction and insulation materials, auto parts, and composites. The interior stalk (hurd) is used in various applications such as animal bedding, raw-material inputs, low-quality papers, and composites. Hemp seed and oilcake are used in a range of foods and beverages, and can be an alternative food protein source. Oil from the crushed hemp seed is an ingredient in a range of body-care products and also nutritional supplements. Hemp seed is also used for industrial oils, cosmetics and personal care, and pharmaceuticals, among other composites."



During World War II, the federal government encouraged farmers to grow hemp (and it made the film *Hemp for Victory*, from which Kakert's Facebook page gets its name). Kakert said he's found references to 11 hemp-processing plants in Iowa from that era, and his interest in the subject was spurred when he came across a manual for a Deere & Company hemp harvester from the 1940s.

Kakert said he's excited by the possibilities of hemp's myriad uses. He would like to print on hemp canvas, for example.

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And he believes that legalized industrial hemp could be a boon to the local economy: “We wouldn’t have to get cotton from down south; we could make hemp fabric that’s grown in Iowa. If I want to build a house out of hempcrete, why should I have to import it from the UK?”

He added: “The U.S. is importing millions of dollars in hemp products” that could be grown and made in the United States. “Why is this?”

The reason is that industrial hemp is a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substance Act’s definition of marijuana (“all parts of the plant *Cannabis sativa L*”), and it cannot be grown or processed in the United States without a permit from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). However, hemp products *can* be imported into the United States.

Equating industrial hemp with the drug marijuana dates back to the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937. After that law was ruled unconstitutional in 1969 in *Leary V. United States*, Congress responded in 1970 with the Controlled Substances Act.

At that point, Murphy said, there was no hemp industry in the United States to fight the law’s definitions that made industrial hemp an illegal drug: “The last industrial-hemp crop grown commercially was done in 1957 in Wisconsin, so when the Controlled Substances Act was being drafted, there were no hemp farmers or processors to say, ‘Hey, wait a minute. What about us?’”

Kakert said that “lawmakers didn’t necessarily realize they were throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” yet the legal linkage remains. As a result, the issue of industrial hemp is often tied to (and confused with) drug legalization, and Kakert and other industrial-hemp advocates are adamant about drawing distinctions between them.

“I split the two up,” Kakert said, “because the biggest hurdle right now ... is that there’s still this misunderstanding and this stigma that you say ‘hemp,’ [and] a lot of people say, ‘I’m against marijuana.’”

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That confusion, he said, makes it difficult for many legislators to support industrial hemp. ([See sidebar.](#))

“Lawmakers don’t want to be considered soft on drugs,” Kakert said, “since this has been collateral damage in the drug war. It’s got that stigma attached.”

Although industrial hemp and the drug marijuana come from the same species of plant (*Cannabis sativa*

), they’re different varieties, they’re grown differently, and they look different because of how they’re cultivated and the parts of them that are used. Most crucially from a drug-control perspective, they’re distinguished by the percentage of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive component of

Cannabis

; industrial hemp is bred or processed to have a relatively low percentage of THC compared to drug marijuana.

Because of that, Kakert said, discussing industrial hemp and the drug marijuana together makes no sense, and he refused to state a position on legalizing marijuana as a drug. “It’s like asking somebody who manufactures oregano or powdered sugar what they think about drug policy, just because they look the same” as marijuana and cocaine, he said.

Vote Hemp’s Murphy said that the DEA exploits the legal situation: “The only reason that there’s a stigma attached to industrial hemp is because of law enforcement and specifically the DEA saying that there is no difference between the varieties. It’s all defined as marijuana under the Controlled Substances Act. They can intentionally confuse and conflate things.”

The current lumping together of industrial hemp and drug marijuana is in significant part simply maintaining the tough-on-drugs status quo. But Murphy said the DEA also continues its opposition because its arguments are so weak. Legalization, he said, would make the agency’s stated concerns look like little more than unfounded fear-mongering.

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