

Industrial hemp's time has come

Bipartisan effort arises in Sacramento to legalize growing the plant in California

The California Assembly is poised to do something sensible - removing restrictions on an important activity, thereby opening opportunities, rather than imposing new regulations or taxes - for once. It would do well to get on with legalizing and regulating industrial hemp.

A fascinating alliance across party lines has emerged behind AB1147, introduced by San Francisco Democrat Mark Leno. Irvine Republican Chuck DeVore, a military veteran and solid conservative, has joined as a principal co-author.

Hemp, of course, is the cannabis plant, also known as marijuana. Although California voters authorized the medical use of marijuana, recreational use - inhaling smoke or vapors from the buds and flowers, which contain tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) - is forbidden. What has been lost by prohibiting recreational use is the fact that other parts of the plant, which do not contain THC, have important uses.

The fiber from the plant's stalk is the strongest natural fiber known and has been (and still is) used to make paper, fabric, rope and other products. (The word "canvas" is derived from "cannabis," and most sails during the era of the sailing ship were made from hempen fabric.) The stalk also is heavy in cellulose, which can be used in some plastics, building materials and other products. The seeds are edible and have an excellent balance of essential fatty acids. The oil is used in body-care products like lotions, soaps and shampoos.

All these products are legally produced in the United States, constituting a \$270 million market this year. While other states, notably North Dakota, have legalized industrial hemp, most of the hemp used in these products is imported, mostly from Canada. Why should California's farmers not be able to benefit from that market?

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap in Escondido, the No. 1 producer of natural soaps in the world, has spent \$800,000 in the past five years importing hemp oil from Canada, although Canadian supplies are subject to interruptions due to weather. Nutiva, an organic food company headquartered in Sebastopol, believes it could save \$100,000 a year in transportation costs if it could buy hemp seeds from California farmers, according to a paper prepared by Mr. Leno's staff after interviews with the companies.

California's climate is better-suited than Canada's to agricultural production of hemp, and it makes a good rotation crop with soybeans, helping to replenish the soil.

Because some 30 countries grow hemp for industrial/commercial purposes varieties of the plant that are extremely low in THC have been developed. AB1147 allows planting only varieties with less than three-tenths of 1 percent THC in the dried flowering tops. The varieties used for smoking contain 5 percent to 15 percent THC.

Hemp was a commercial crop in California in the early 1900s, and during World War II the government encouraged farmers to grow hemp when supplies in the Philippines were cut off. Assemblyman Leno told us he has talked to numerous small farmers in the Central Valley who would like to grow hemp because their calculations show they could make more per acre than with crops they are currently growing.

AB1147, which does not legalize recreational use and regulates industrial production, has passed the Public Safety Committee and will be considered in the Appropriations Committee this week. Passing it would simply be common sense.