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N.D. Pushing Ahead With Hemp Farming Rules

By James MacPherson, The Associated Press

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BISMARCK, N.D. -- North Dakota is pushing ahead with plans to license state farmers to grow industrial hemp even as it tries to allay law enforcement fears about marijuana's biological cousin.

State Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson and his department are crafting hemp rules after meeting in February with Drug Enforcement Agency officials in Washington. A public hearing on the proposed rules is slated for June 15.

The rules would require a criminal background check on farmers who want to grow hemp. The sale of hemp and location of the hemp fields must be documented. And the farmer must get a permit from the DEA.

Adam Eiding, a spokesman for Vote Hemp, the lobbying arm of the hemp industry, said North Dakota is the first state to actually craft rules to license hemp farmers.

"We're very supportive," Eiding said of the state's efforts.

Hemp contains trace amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, a banned substance, and it falls under federal anti-drug rules, said Steve Robertson, a DEA special agent in Washington.

The state rules would be "contingent on the federal government changing its mind," Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem said. The likelihood of that is "very small," he said.

Rogene Waite, a spokeswoman for the DEA in Washington, said federal drug laws don't make a distinction between marijuana and hemp because they both contain THC.

Johnson and agriculture commissioners from three other states -- Massachusetts, West Virginia and Wisconsin -- met in February with DEA officials in Washington. They discussed what would be required to allow industrial hemp production, Johnson said, and he believes North Dakota's proposed rules address those requirements.

"We think this is reasonable," said Johnson, a Democrat. "We've bent over backward to make sure people won't be growing marijuana in these fields."

State Rep. Dave Monson, a Republican and state House assistant majority leader, said he was pleased Johnson was able to wangle a meeting with DEA to discuss hemp rules. He called it a "huge step."

Industrial hemp would be an alternative cash crop for North Dakota farmers because it's used to make food, clothing, cosmetics, paper, rope and other products. Large-scale cultivation of industrial hemp is legal in Canada.

Supporters claim that despite its family links to marijuana, hemp is safe because it contains only trace amounts of the mind-altering chemical.

A number of states have already passed laws aimed at allowing hemp farming, including Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, North Dakota and West Virginia. California's Assembly recently approved a bill permitting hemp farming, which is awaiting work by state senators.

Farmer Doug Goehring, of Menoken, a Republican who is challenging Johnson's bid for re-election in November, said he also supports hemp production in North Dakota.

"I think it has some potential in North Dakota as another alternative crop," Goehring said. Hemp already grows wild in the state, he said.

Goehring said the U.S. Navy buys hemp from other countries for such things as mooring lines for ships. "We're not even allowed to provide it to our own government, which is a little disappointing," he said.

Goehring, who grows wheat, soybeans and corn, said he likely would add hemp to his rotation, if allowed. "It can grow in some pretty raunchy soil, in some pretty tough conditions," Goehring said.

On the Net:

Vote Hemp: <http://www.votehemp.com>

DEA: <http://www.dea.gov>

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