

**COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMER
& ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES****A New Era for Hemp in Illinois**

On April 30th, the Illinois Department of Agriculture began accepting applications via their website for the cultivation and processing of industrial hemp for the 2019 growing season. Within 48 hours more than 350 farmers sent in applications to grow industrial hemp showing the tremendous interest across the state. There are no plans to limit the amount of acres that will be in production in Illinois this growing season. Touted as being a potentially billion-dollar industry for Illinois, Governor JB Pritzker and Illinois Department of Agriculture Acting Director John Sullivan have continued to praise the ability of this versatile crop to have an impact on the state economy by creating jobs in both urban and rural areas alike.

Despite the debate surrounding industrial hemp because of its close relationship to marijuana, the versatility of this crop is undeniable. Industrial hemp has the ability to be grown for grain, fiber, and cannabidiol (CBD) depending on the production system in place. In simple terms, grain production is similar to small grain production, fiber to hay production, and CBD production to a vegetable or specialty crop operation. It is critical to know and understand the different types of production systems involved in industrial hemp, as it is easy to get the details mixed up. Industrial hemp has over 2500 uses that we currently know of. For example, hemp grain has shown promise as a protein source for both animals and humans as it is nutrient dense and hemp seed oil contains anti-inflammatory properties. Hemp fiber can be used in the textile, construction, and manufacturing industries with potential to remediate soils contaminated with heavy metals. CBD, which is produced from un-pollinated female hemp plants only, has been touted as a miracle cure for a variety of ailments from anxiety to epilepsy though not all of the claims have been backed by good research.

Despite most of the interest being in CBD, that has not stopped several universities across Illinois to begin researching grain and fiber production. University of Illinois, Western Illinois University, and Southern Illinois University will all be conducting hemp grain and/or fiber production experiments in 2019 to determine best management practices for this new crop. The goal is to gather preliminary information which can then be used to develop replicated trials across the state and evaluate variety performance. While there is tremendous interest in the future of hemp grain and fiber production at the commercial level, a vast majority of the grower applications will be for CBD production which can be cultivated successfully on limited acreage. A large reason for this is that market and supply chain for the grain and fiber crop are virtually non-existent in the region. These markets are not established because hemp was banned by the Marijuana Tax Act in 1937 which did not distinguish industrial hemp from marijuana. While both are considered to be “cannabis,” industrial hemp is a variety which does not produce a lot of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is the psychoactive compound found in marijuana. CBD, however, is the non-psychoactive cannabinoid found primarily in hemp.

Hemp can do so much more than just CBD,” founder and CEO of the Illinois Hemp Growers Association (IHGA) Rachel Berry, stated. The IHGA, started by Berry and her husband Chris, is a group of hemp educators and business owners whose goal is to build a network for people to empower themselves via partnerships to grow the hemp industry in Illinois. “If we want to actually start making clothing, building materials, and bioplastics here in Illinois then we are going to need large scale processing,” Berry said. There is a lot of excitement regarding hemp production right now, but this needs to ‘be bigger than the hemp train’ if this is going to truly succeed in Illinois.

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Berry expressed that she and the rest of the IHGA are “making exciting progress as we bring in more people, build our plan, and figure out what we actually need and where we need it.”

The hemp industry is poised to grow in Illinois, but there are many risks posed to producers and investors alike. As it stands, there are currently no local markets and elevators to sell grain as you would for corn and soybeans nor are there any fiber processing mills; however, there are some in the surrounding states, Wisconsin and Kentucky for example, who are ahead of the game. That will change soon according to Illinois Farm Bureau Associate Director of State Legislation, Bill Bodine. Bodine says there is a lot of learning to be done as we determine the market for this crop. Regardless of the production system used or the end product, Bodine encourages farmers to determine a market for their product and begin to develop relationships as the market begins to form. For now, determining which communities are interested in hemp production, and they type of hemp they wish to produce, will guide the locations for the various types of processing facilities and where they are needed.

Current plans are to establish two production “nodes” over the course of the next decade in northern and southern IL due to their proximity to other hemp producing states as well as the access to other means of transportation such as railways, highways, and barges. As there is currently no market, there are no pricing and production data which can be used to reliably put a plan together in a clear and understandable way. The plus side here is that Illinois is getting a leg up on the rest of the country who does not already have hemp production in place. This is because the national regulations for hemp production set forth by the 2018 farm bill will not go into effect until the 2020 growing season. If hemp is really here to stay, there is no need to rush into business with so many unknowns while the market is being established.

If you have would like more information about industrial hemp production, visit the Illinois Extension website at <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/jsw/ihp/>. For additional questions, contact Phillip Alberti, Crop Science Educator with University of Illinois Extension in the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences at palberti@illinois.edu, 815-235-4125 or on Twitter (@NorthernILCrops).

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