

Sentinel

Truman man promotes new crop

FAIRMONT — There are many questions and purported solutions as to how best to provide jobs and grow local economies, especially in rural farming areas. One of the ways to do that is to consider new ways to utilize familiar crops, as demonstrated by the wide range of soybean products available to consumers today.

One local man is hoping to provide area farmers with another crop option altogether. Brady Ekstrom, of Truman, is looking to promote the growth of industrial hemp.

Ekstrom knows the idea can be controversial but says it doesn't need to be. It is important to note that industrial hemp is not marijuana, a cause for concern in the local area. While both are from the genus *Cannabis*, hemp contains very little of the infamous THC compound.

Rather, industrial hemp has a wide variety of applications. Ekstrom shares why he believes the crop could be a boon to area farmers and residents alike, noting that he has worked with another man, Kyle Steuber, of Northrop. In addition, Ekstrom has initiated several conversations with farmers and local businesses to promote the potential crop.

“We’ve always had the focus on industrial hemp for fiber and grain,” he said. “There’s so many products that can be made from the fiber and grain on a large scale, and a lot of people don’t know about that.”

Ekstrom noted that he recently took a sample of batten insulation made from hemp fiber to recent downtown revitalization meetings in Fairmont, as part of his efforts.

“When I told them what it was, and that a bunch of other things could be made from hemp fiber, they were just floored. So our focus is on giving the farmers another option for a commodity in the near future, and economic development in this area. We feel that this industry could bring a lot of manufacturing jobs.

According to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, The 2014 Farm Bill contained a provision to allow state departments of agriculture to administer pilot programs to study the growth, cultivation, and marketing of hemp. In 2015, the Minnesota Industrial Hemp Development Act became law. Allowing the MDA to create a hemp pilot program. The Minnesota pilot program operated from 2016 through 2020.

The 2018 Farm Bill officially legalized hemp cultivation for commercial purposes and removed it from the Controlled Substances Act. On October 31, 2019, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the Interim Final Rule (7 CFR part 990), which forms the regulatory framework for all hemp cultivation nationwide. Each state and tribal authority had to submit a state plan for approval to USDA if they wanted to continue to regulate hemp at the state/tribal level. The Minnesota state plan was approved in July 2020.

Ekstrom went on to share some applications for farmers, as well as other industries.

“This would be done on large acres,” he said. “We also feel like this could be a third crop in the crop rotation in this area. So that’s what we’re trying to make happen.”

Ekstrom shares that one potential market could be grain for animal feed. However, that is not legal as of yet. He also shares that the inside of the stalk could be used for animal bedding, while microfibers from the

outside of the stalk could be used for biocomposites for things such as plastics and biodiesel.

“Then there’s things like rope and clothes,” he continued. “It’s neverending, it’s a renewable resource.”

Indeed, it turns out that industrial hemp can be used for building materials, paper products, food, furniture, personal care products and textiles among other things.

“You could build a whole house out of hemp products,” he said. “There’s things like hempcrete, and they’re going to make OSB (Oriented Strand Board) by this fall. It leads into a lot of manufacturing jobs that could be created here.”

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