HEMP INDUSTRY

ADOBE/ARTJAZZ

I'M THE PRESIDENT OF LEBLANC CNE and we began growing hemp several years ago for fiber, not just CBD extraction. We work with papermakers as our test kitchens for hemp paper production.

I see discarded cardboard everywhere. Flattened boxes occupy a disproportionate amount of household and commercial trash. Everyone is ordering online during the pandemic, resulting in a flood of individual purchases often shipped in single boxes.

Recycled or not, that represents far too many trees being cut.

What if Amazon and the USPS switched to tree-free boxes?

Here's my vision: Amazon and the USPS switch to tree-free boxes. They commit to shifting from wood products to hemp, bamboo and other renewable fiber sources. They need to invest in those already making hemp fiber products and help others by incubating this new industry. Pay a premium for non-tree packaging. Educate entrepreneurs and farmers by teaching them what you want. The packaging industry needs to pivot knowing it's a long term investment – an investment for all of us – not just their stockholders.

What will it take? A steady and growing supply of fiber-specific hemp being grown in bulk, and the processing infrastructure to convert that hemp into cardboard. The first part is agricultural and the latter is manufacturing, and the two must be developed in tandem. Why grow hemp fiber if there's no demand for it? Plus, a hemp cardboard factory needs plant material in bulk at a price that makes economic sense.

STEP ONE: Farmers need to grow hemp at the scale they now grow corn, wheat and soybeans. Farmers need to grow hemp fiber cultivars that produce long, strong fiber and lots of it, ideally adjacent to other farms doing the same thing – creating a centralized source of raw hemp fiber.

STEP TWO: Why not use the existing paper and cardboard manufacturing factories? The current paper and cardboard industry is fine tuned to wood pulp. Hemp is neither a hardwood nor a softwood. Removing the bast on the outside from the hurd on the inside is not the same as stripping bark from a log. The wood pulp chemistry isn't the same as hemp. For example, pectin binds the individual bast fibers together, as well as lignin and hemicellulose. It's almost better to build hemp cardboard factories from scratch.

In a perfect world I see hemp fiber factories smack dab in the middle of hemp farm country. Moving fiber from farm to factory should be quick and cheap. The corn belt is the ideal candidate, especially the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota and Iowa. Lots of land, lots of tractors and other farm equipment, access to trains and highways, and a strong farming tradition. Bonus: There's no existing outdoor recreational Cannabis industry, so cross pollination is a non-issue.

Let's start integrating hemp farming into 4H, educating local county extension agents and making agricultural schools our partners. In the end, hemp is just another crop.

Small companies are the ones doing the cutting edge work with hemp fiber.

These are entrepreneurial hemp activists looking towards the future, quietly doing the work somewhat out of sight. This industry will grow and grow quickly. Now is the time to jumpstart, nurture and foster an American hemp fiber industry. Are you listening Amazon? I see far too many of your discarded boxes on the curb come trash day. Recycled or not, at some point a tree was cut. Incentivize the market. Invest in innovators. Plant the seeds of a hemp packaging industry. A crumb from your table can be a feast at another's.