HEMP INDUSTRY

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THE USDA
IS HEMP'S
BEST FRIEND

IF YOU READ THIS COLUMN on a regular basis, you know I really want the hemp industry to grow and prosper. And for that to happen, we need successful and prosperous hemp farmers. While this seems obvious, way too many of today's hemp farmers are failing. The primary reason is the overwhelming emphasis on CBD – resulting in an oversupply which reduced wholesale prices. Everyone is preoccupied with a very narrow slice of hemp's potential. Whatever happened to the hemp activists' mantra: "Food. Fuel. Fiber."

Hemp farmers are growing the wrong thing: hemp for CBD extraction. When the FDA does bless hemp as medicine, my guess is that the rules and regs will favor Big Pharma. Why? Because Big Pharma has more lobbyists with more money than the hemp industry. Hemp medical preparations could require licenses with expensive fees, inspections by multiple bureaucracies and other roadblocks that hinder small players.

All is not lost. If the hemp market is to grow and mature, we need to think beyond cannabinoids. Hemp pioneers are developing and selling hemp building materials like hempcrete, hemp wood, hemp insulation and other products aimed at the construction industry. Processing facilities require two things: proximity to hemp farms to reduce shipping costs and a constant, reliable supply of hemp – lots of it. Today there simply aren't enough farmers growing fiber to make this happen.

Plant-based foods are now mainstream. Ask the fast food chains. Non-meat burgers and chicken-less chicken? Do you want fries with that? One doesn't have to be vegetarian, let alone vegan or keto or paleo, to eat plant-based meals without a second thought. No one is more amazed than I, a vegetarian since the '70s. I never thought I'd live to see the day milk doesn't necessarily come from cows, but plants instead.

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Will hemp building materials catch on? How long before Starbucks sells hemp creamer? Will today's CBD hemp farmers transition to fiber and food? Will they survive long enough to supply these nascent markets? The real question is: What will hemp farmers grow to foster fiber and food companies? Certainly not Charlotte's Web or Cherry Wine.

Where will the seeds come from? Who's got the genetics that are the key to hemp's future?

Believe it or not, the U.S. government has a hemp seed bank. The Department of Agriculture has a large and growing collection of hemp genetics stored in The Hemp Germplasm Repository. This treasure trove will enable hemp farmers to grow the long forgotten heirloom varieties that may very well be suited to tomorrow's hemp industries.

Why is this effort so important? It's cataloging what's out there, preserving it for future use. Remember: Extinct is forever. Whatever we lose is gone for good. As new markets emerge, farmers need to grow cultivars tailored to each new niche. Moving forward, hemp farmers need access to as wide and diverse of a catalog as possible.

Again, we've outgrown CBD and we need everything we can get our hands on. And here's the best part: If we all agree that these new hemp markets like hempcrete and hemp foods are going to explode, farmers need all the help they can get.

With the U.S. government's help, one day hemp will be grown on the same scale as wheat, soy and corn are today. Thousands of acres across multiple states. Nothing less.

THE HEMP GERMPLASM REPOSITORY IS PART OF THE NATIONAL PLANT GERMPLASM SYSTEM

The hemp collection's mission is to conserve as much genetic and geographically diverse hemp genetics as possible and distribute it to plant breeders, researchers and educators. Their long term vision is to expand the collection to include more hemp varieties and catalog them for fiber, agronomic, morphological, horticultural and secondary metabolite traits. The Hemp Germplasm Repository would love for individuals with interesting or unique germplasm to consider donating a seed sample to the collection. Learn more at tinyurl.com/germplasm