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The U.S. Continues to Outlaw Versatile Forest-Saving Hemp Solidarity America By John Funicello BC Columnist

According to its proponents, hemp used for industrial and manufacturing purposes has more than 25,000 uses, yet the U.S. has to import whatever hemp is sold to the general public.

Hemp is banned because it resembles marijuana when it is growing in the field and law enforcement officials find it difficult to tell the difference; not that it would be easy to do, but it is possible. It's just easier to ban both and that's what the U.S. government did, back about six or seven decades ago.

In that way, a plant that is useful for so many things was eliminated from production, processing, and retail sale throughout the country. It is said that the founding documents of America were printed on hemp paper. The ships that carried goods in and out of U.S. ports likely had sails made of hemp cloth, used hawsers and other lines made of hemp, all of which were tended by sailors wearing hemp clothing and shoes.

Hemp clothing (mostly hats and tee shirts and some pants) is sold in some stores today, but the material is imported from other countries, such as Canada and some European countries. Or, you can buy edible hemp seeds in health food and other stores. And, you can buy hemp twine and rope, but American farmers cannot grow hemp.

The list of uses for hemp seems endless, from "hempcrete" as a building material, to plastics, to lubricating and edible oils, to paper, to fiberboard, to medicines, to foods of various kinds. The problem is that

the look-alike plant, marijuana, contains THC, the psychoactive substance in that plant that can cause a high. Hemp contains a negligible amount and smoking or consuming it will not in any way cause a high.

Trouble is, when a local cop or a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent looks out over a field of growing hemp, it just looks like enough marijuana to get the grower 99 years in prison. The "war on drugs" has that effect on people and, make no mistake; a big part of the prohibition of hemp is the money involved in the "war on marijuana." It's billions a year, if it's a buck. Law enforcement has used every trick in the book in recent years, trying to catch even the smallest marijuana grower, even resorting to drones with cameras, to helicopters. And, that's not to mention flyovers using on-board heat detection devices.

It's truly a shame that there has been so little discussion about this and apparently no one in authority has initiated research to find easy ways to tell the difference between the two plants. Surely, scientists and agricultural technicians are as smart as those in a dozen other countries, where there is hardly a problem for farmers to grow a plant that could save untold numbers of small farms across a wide spectrum of climate conditions.

While there are people who, for decades, have lobbied for laws at the federal level and at the state level for legalizing marijuana, or at least, decriminalizing it, not much has been said about the use of industrial hemp, although there have been some bills introduced to provide a way to at least test hemp growing and processing for its varied uses. The discussion, such as it has been, has been very quiet and certainly has not been made a part of any popular debate. Newspapers, which do not hesitate to take editorial positions on many subjects, have been noticeably silent on the use of industrial hemp, so they have prompted very little discussion.

In a few states, some farmers have been working to allow growing of hemp on an experimental basis, under regulated conditions, but even that is not widely discussed. For many farmers, being able to grow hemp would allow them to save the family farm by growing a hemp crop as the cash crop, stabilizing the farm's income and allowing other crops to be raised to supplement the industrial crop income. Proponents of hemp as a main crop point out that it needs little or no fertilizer, and few, if any pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides. The crop residue, plowed back into the soil, also builds soil tilth.

From an environmentalist's point of view, there are some estimates that hemp for use as paper could eliminate some 50 percent of forest cutting for paper. It's easy to see who would be vehemently opposed to that, but people serious about reducing global warming by leaving forests standing across the planet should be some of the most vocal proponents of farming hemp. That's not to say that no tree should ever be cut again, but the theories and practices behind the forest products industry (developed over the past two centuries) need to be revisited.

As for the "war on drugs," it has not been going so well for the past few decades. The demand for illicit drugs in the U.S. has resulted in social disruption everywhere and turmoil on the nation's southern frontier, with Mexican cartels warring with, and killing, each other to supply the seeming endless demand.

Politicians and the judiciary, to slow that demand, have developed some of the most draconian policies for enforcement and incarceration of any country and the numbers still climb. Drug crimes involving marijuana are a considerable proportion of the inmates in our prisons and jails and many of them are sentenced to long terms for a small amount of the substance. It's costly and it has ruined tens of thousands of lives.

Recently, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stated: "Drug prohibition has largely driven America's incarceration rate to unacceptable levels. Drug offenders comprise over 500,000 of the more than 2 million people in our nation's prisons and jails, and drug offenses and failed drug tests account for a significant number of those returning to prison for parole and probation violations. Most of those incarcerated for marijuana offenses do not belong in prison, as they represent little or no risk to public safety. Removing criminal penalties for marijuana offenses will therefore reduce the U.S. prison population and more effectively protect the public and promote public health."

The laws prohibiting marijuana possession and use are all over the map. The federal government has its laws and the states have their own versions. Often, those interests clash and the ones who suffer are average citizens, and many of them have spent years in jail or prison for possession of small amounts. As always, the arrest, conviction, and incarceration rate is wildly disparate, with minorities involved at a rate of 9-1 in some states. Use of drugs is at about the same rate for white and minority Americans. The states where medical marijuana is legal

find that the federal laws purport to supercede and federal agents may or may not enforce them, seemingly according to whim. Then there is the cost of enforcement.

Pot prisoners cost about \$1 billion a year, according to a mid-decade report on the online Alternet and in that same period (2005-2007), marijuana law enforcement cost more than \$7.6 billion a year, including police, court, and prison costs. That money could be much better and efficiently used to improve schools, housing, and neighborhoods that are seen as "problem areas." The surprise, though, is that the highest *rates* of drug enforcement, trials and incarceration are in the more conservative regions of the country (read the "red" states), where minorities are still locked up for the same charges at a much higher rate than whites.

Efforts to ease off on the wasteful expenditure of time, effort, and money have been made, but have resulted in minor changes. Last week, voters in at least two states, Colorado and Washington, have approved the use of marijuana for *recreational* use. One might assume that this would pave the way for increased use of pot for medicinal use in more states, but don't count on it. The money continues to be poured into the "war on drugs," which seems to be as amorphous, expansive, and costly as the "war on terrorism." In other words, it can go on for as long as the authorities want, and those who profit from it are sure to go to extreme lengths to make sure it does go on.

Pharmaceutical companies loom large in this, because the use of marijuana has been shown to give relief to untold numbers of patients with various illnesses and diseases, but without the side effects of prescription drugs, which can be intolerable. Those same companies cannot be happy about an *Associated Press* story this month that Israel is seeing the growth of the use of medical marijuana. A company there has developed a marijuana strain that has all the benefits of cannabis, but without the THC. It's too early to tell, but growing this new kind of pot could be as easy as growing tomatoes, and that surely would upset the pharmaceutical companies, whose billions in profits depend on the production and sale of *their* drugs.

It's hard to justify keeping the marijuana prohibition law that is seven decades old, which does three things: it keeps the nation from growing one of the most useful plants (think jobs and local economies), it continues the socially destructive enforcement of outdated laws that falls most heavily on the poor and minorities, and it causes immense additional suffering by sick and dying Americans who would benefit

greatly from the use of medical marijuana. It's time to debate the issue and reconsider America's attitudes.

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