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Wisconsin's Past, Present, and Future in Hemp

by Rep. Dave Considine (D-Baraboo)



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July 17-23 is Hemp History Week, so it's a great opportunity to highlight Wisconsin's past, present, and future in the industry. In the past, Wisconsin was a national leader in hemp. Industrial hemp was grown experimentally here in the early 1900s, we had 7,000 acres dedicated to hemp farming in 1917, and by the 1940s we led the nation in hemp production. At that time, hand labor was necessary and this crop was intensive to produce. However Wisconsin's farmers used their great work ethic to become leaders in harvesting this crop. During the height of hemp production our state also had 42 processing mills. These mills were able to process the fibrous hemp stalks into a number of materials including rope, shoes, sewing materials, and caulking for the U.S. military.

From the mid-1900s until the passage of 2017 Senate Bill 119 it was illegal to grow hemp in Wisconsin. After I introduced bills in April 2015 and February 2017 on this topic, my colleagues and I finally got a bill to the Governor's desk in November of 2017. This bill was the first step in many to get to the hemp program that we now have in Wisconsin. Today the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection licenses farmers to grow hemp for CBD and fiber.

The hemp crop is not without struggles as producers have experienced unfavorable seasons, little access to processing facilities, and crops that are "hot" or too high in THC. Thankfully the USDA and DATCP published rules that allow hemp growers to take advantage of hemp remediation. This means that growers have an alternative to total hemp destruction if their crop exceeds the regulatory limit of .3% total delta-9 THC.

Unfortunately testing is currently a burdensome task as DATCP must test each variant grown by producers and they must send staff on site to do so. As a passionate advocate for the hemp industry, I have been and will continue to encourage to increase efficiencies in this program. One of these opportunities is for the state to encourage public-private partnerships for testing hemp for THC. Another

would modernize Wisconsin's old hemp and paper mills, which could help increase processing markets for our producers.

If you didn't already know it, you now understand that hemp and Wisconsin's history as an agricultural leader are intertwined. We have a unique opportunity to add hemp as another viable tool in a producer's toolbox. In future years I pledge to continue to advocate for progress in this industry.