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STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Green Acres – the Return of Wisconsin Hemp

Six decades ago, Wisconsin led the nation in the cultivation of industrial hemp. Today, our farmers are poised to lead once again. This session, I worked with Rep. Jesse Kremer (R-Kewaskum), members of Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, and others in the state's agricultural community to craft the Farm Freedom Act. This bill enables farmers in Wisconsin to take full advantage of the 2014 federal farm bill, which allowed states to grant licenses to farmers to research the growing and marketing of industrial hemp. Our bill passed both houses of the legislature unanimously, and was signed into law by Governor Walker in late November – which opened the door for farmers licensed by DATCP to grow hemp this year.

The bill didn't start out as a sure thing though. Before we could secure support for hemp we had to make the differences between hemp and its more well-known cousin, marijuana clear. Legally, industrial hemp must contain less than 0.3% THC – the active ingredient in marijuana that causes a psychoactive effect. Industrial hemp has hundreds of applications and can be used in several products – including batteries, brake pads, food items, building products, and plastics - but it cannot be used to get high. For this reason, I think it's important to keep conversations about hemp and marijuana separate. They are distinctly different plants with different uses, though the federal government persists in listing hemp as a schedule 1 controlled substance.

That, however may be changing in the next few months thanks to bi-partisan legislation authored by Sen. Mitch McConnell and supported by both of our Wisconsin senators. This bill, the Hemp Farming Act of 2018, has been added to the 2018 Farm Bill which passed the Senate 86-11 in late June. Five of our state's eight members of the House of Representative have indicated strong support for delisting hemp and empowering farmers to add this crop to their portfolio. When Rep. Kremer and I crafted our state's hemp legislation, we kept in mind possible changes coming from the federal government, and wrote it in such a way that freedoms for Wisconsin farmers would expand to include everything permitted by the federal government.

Reform of federal laws dealing with hemp could be very meaningful for many of our state's farmers, because there are quite a few farmers who are interested in hemp. When we began working on this bill, we hoped that two to three dozen farmers would get growing licenses this first season. We based that number on the experiences other states had after reintroduction. This spring, we were pleasantly surprised when 370 farmers and processors –10 times our initial projection - applied for licenses from DATCP. Initial interest in the program indicated that 2,200 acres could be planted this year, and we only expect that number to grow next season.

The deadline to apply with DATCP for a 2019 growing license is December 31st of this year. As always, it is important for farmers to have a market for the crop before getting too deeply involved in the process, but the hemp industry has a lot of growth potential – and that starts in Wisconsin fields with Wisconsin farmers.