

Hawai'i's Hot Hemp Industry

Excitement builds locally as hemp production is legalized, but there are still hurdles on the way to commercialization.

BY MEGHAN MINER MURRAY

LONG LUMPED INTO A LEGAL CATEGORY WITH ITS MORE ILLICIT COUSIN, hemp lacks marijuana's high-inducing THC levels, but promises many benefits, from affordable biofuel to strong fiber to products and medicines, including wildly popular CBD (cannabidiol) oil, which is said to have wide-ranging therapeutic properties. Following a more than 100-year hiatus in the state, the legal return of hemp to Hawai'i began in 2014 with a provision in the federal Farm Bill that gave states the power to start regulated hemp programs for research purposes. Academics from the University of Hawai'i's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) program concluded in 2015 that "there is significant potential for a successful hemp agricultural industry in Hawai'i." The state's first licenses to grow hemp under the Industrial Hemp Pilot Program were awarded in June of last year, and now 13 farmers on all of the main Hawaiian Islands (except Lāna'i) have permits to grow up to 10 acres of the crop each. At least three of those farms currently have hemp crops in the ground.

Gail Barber and her husband Cab—long-time advocates of sustainability—run a 20-acre farm in Kohala on Hawai'i Island and received Hawai'i industrial hemp license #1. Gail says that the permitting process involved some paperwork, but was relatively straightforward. She believes the process to grow the crop is worth it, not only for hemp's many uses, but because "this plant makes sense for

islands that need to move away from importing so much."

Though the excitement around growing hemp in Hawai'i is there, hemp still has a long way to go before it becomes as simple as growing, say, tomatoes. Until Hawai'i formalizes a new program based on changes from the December 2018 Farm Bill—which legalized hemp production, removed it from the list of controlled substances, and made it a covered commodity under crop insurance—the existing permitting program is technically still a research one. Licenses require growers to test their plants for THC levels and pesticides at certified laboratories.

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- GAIL BARBER

Farmers also need to keep in touch with the state throughout the growing process, sharing information on planting, harvesting, crop movement, production costs, water usage, security measures, as well as labor, marketing, and other costs. The number of two-year, 10-acre permits are not capped, but the program has just one full-time employee, Shelley Choy, who carefully sifts through each application and issues permits quarterly.

"Federal law would have to change [yet] again if hemp were to be grown

like any other crop," notes Choy. She adds, "Growing a compliant hemp crop is not easy, and there is a lot of misinformation out there." Her advice to interested farmers? "Do your homework, know the legal layout both federally and locally for growing and selling your crop, and know the people you are working with really well before you get into any business deal or partnership with them ... The industry is full of fraudulent seed sellers, investors, consultants, growers, etc. looking to cash in on the market."

But changes are afoot to make it easier for farmers to grow hemp based on the provisions established in the most recent federal Farm Bill passed in December. Hawai'i State Senator Mike Gabbard, chair of the Committee on Agriculture and Environment, helped pave the legal route for Hawai'i hemp starting with the original pilot program in 2014. "The key is for us to pass SB 1353 this session," says Senator Gabbard. "This is a bill I introduced that would establish a commercial hemp program in our state. The idea would be for farmers to be able to bring hemp seed from places on the Mainland from licensed growers, allow farmers to increase the acreage of their hemp farms well beyond the current limit of 10 acres, and allow hemp farmers to transport hemp flowers to processing centers. The bill would increase the staffing at the Department of Agriculture to run the program from 1 to 3 employees. There's a ton of interest among farmers to get hemp production up and running in a big way." The session concludes May 2.

Senator Gabbard says, “My vision has always been for a cottage hemp industry using Hawai‘i branding, with the hula girl underneath the coconut tree and the guy strumming his ‘ukulele ... Hāna hemp granola, Hanalei hemp toothpaste, Honolulu hemp aloha shirts, Hawai‘i Island hemp CBD tincture are just some of the many products that could be coming our way.” But Gail Barber and other licensed growers are concerned that loosening restrictions may end up inadvertently harming Hawai‘i and Hawai‘i farmers in the long run. “Hawai‘i farmers may be overwhelmed by outside corporations and investors that are looking to swoop in and dominate the hemp production here because the cannabinoid (CBD) market is so hot and lucrative,” says Barber. “I’ve sat in meetings with several Mainland groups who want to tie up a lot of land in hemp. On one hand, that’s great that more hemp will be produced, but the profit and dollars will largely go out of Hawai‘i. And because some of the hemp oil and flower processing requires experienced labor, I’ve heard these folks talk about importing crews to do the processing. The current program, because grows are limited to 10 acres, supports small family farmers and local entrepreneurs.”

Only time will tell exactly how fruitful Hawai‘i hemp will be. 🌱



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