

James Comer and Jim Holte: Teaming up to revitalize an agricultural industry

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It's not every day that a congressman from Kentucky and a farmer from Wisconsin ignite a national conversation on a specific issue. However, when it comes to industrial hemp no two states are more historically intertwined. We once defined and dominated hemp production in this country and we are poised to do it once again, but first, a little history lesson.

Hemp has been utilized since 8,000 B.C. Early colonial settlers in America were required to grow hemp because it was vital to their everyday existence. It was considered legal tender and could be used to pay taxes. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams grew hemp on their farms and advocated for its commercialization, Even the Declaration of Independence was drafted on hemp paper.

Kentucky was a national leader in hemp production until the early 20th century. Research and processing innovations led to Wisconsin taking the top spot into the late 1950's. However, Wisconsin growers were dependent on getting their seed from Kentucky farmers who produced the finest seed varieties worldwide.

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When our supply lines were cut off from Southeast Asia after the Japanese entered World War II, the U.S. Department of Agriculture championed hemp's cultivation and use with its 'Hemp for Victory' campaign. Grown extensively across the

country, hemp fiber was used for rope, parachute webbing, soldiers' shoes and clothing, and various other uses to aid in the war effort. Unfortunately, a combination of cheap labor in foreign countries and regulatory stipulations in the Marihuana Act of 1937 brought an end to legal and profitable hemp production in the United States by the mid-fifties.

Understanding the past is worthwhile, but now we are looking to the future. With the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, and under supervision of research universities or state departments of agriculture, states were authorized to 'study the growth, cultivation, or marketing of industrial hemp'. Since that time more than 30 states have passed some form of legislation legalizing this type of research, but its full-fledged production and commercialization is extremely hindered by its current designation as a Schedule 1 controlled substance.

The United States is the only major industrialized country that cannot legally grow hemp as a crop, yet we are the largest importer of its materials with annual sales exceeding \$600 million, most of it coming from Canada. This is not only a lost economic opportunity for America's farmers, but also for the hemp processing and manufacturing industries that could flourish. There is a vast market for hemp in foods and beverages, cosmetics, personal care products, nutritional supplements, textiles, paper, construction materials, supercapacitor batteries, automotive products and so much more.

That is why it's so vitally important for Congress to pass HR 3530, the Industrial Hemp Farming Act of 2017. This federal legislation would treat industrial hemp as it should be - a crop. Wisconsin Representatives Glenn Grothman, Mike Gallagher, Gwen Moore, Mark Pocan, and Ron Kind already back the proposal and we are asking the rest of the Wisconsin congressional delegation to join the effort.

As this federal legislation gains steam, Wisconsin is also moving forward to legalize the growing and processing of hemp. A large, bi-partisan group of legislators, led by State Rep. Jesse Kremer and State Sen. Patrick Testin, all recognize that the state has tremendous potential in joining Kentucky on the national forefront of hemp cultivation, research and manufacturing. We urge Wisconsin residents to contact their state elected officials to support Senate Bill 119 and Assembly Bill 183.

With the backing of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture and the National Conference of State Legislatures, we believe we are at a tipping point as Washington, D.C. and

statehouses across the country are openly accepting industrial hemp as a sustainable, eco-friendly and profitable crop. It's time for us to once again embrace our hemp heritage and revitalize a dormant industry that has incredible potential in the 21st century.

— Congressman James Comer represents Kentucky's 1st Congressional District and is the primary author of the Industrial Hemp Farming Act of 2017. Jim Holte, a grain and beef farmer from Elk Mound, is president of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation.