

Kathleen Vinehout: Hemp growing pains

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"I, as a licensed hemp grower, cannot get a list of hemp processors in Wisconsin," wrote Butch Mondeau. He stressed the problem is "a state road block."

Mr. Mondeau is an Eau Claire County hemp farmer. He was planning to sell his crop to the company that supplied seeds but recently learned the company will only buy back certified organic hemp crops. Mr. Mondeau's farm is not certified organic. Looking for someone to buy the crops growing in his field proved a more complex task than expected.

The new law legalizing hemp keeps confidential all contact information for hemp growers and processors in the state. This makes it difficult for farmers to find buyers for their crops in Wisconsin.

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I recently spoke with Rob Richard of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation (WFBF). "We were concerned growers would be harassed by people who didn't understand hemp," said Mr. Richard, who serves as Senior Director of Government Relations. We worked together during the passage of the bill.

Perhaps lawmakers should rethink keeping hemp growers and processors confidential. Mr. Richard suggested one option is to allow farmers and processors to "opt in or opt out of public information so growers can access the list."

Meanwhile, farmers with hemp crops in the field whose marketing plan fell through need immediate help.

Mr. Richard's advice is to proceed with caution. "You have to find a buyer and have a plan on what to do with the product." He noted processors are coming into the state to "manufacture and sell CBD [oil]. Processors are also coming in to deal with grain and fiber, but this is slower."

Mr. Richard is working with former Legislative Council attorney Larry Konopacki to create the Wisconsin Hemp Alliance (WHA), which will work to bring processors, retailers and consumers together with farmers.

The organization is just getting off the ground. Connecting farmers and processors is one of the biggest challenges now.

"There are a lot of people who want to make money, but not a lot doing advocacy, education and marketing," Mr. Konopacki told me. "Growing pains' is a good way to describe it. There are the regular farming problems; equipment, harvesting, and growing conditions. But there are added problems with varieties and markets."

"There are so many different kinds of hemp," Mr. Konopacki pointed out. "It's like saying there are vegetables for sale. I don't want your cauliflower, but I'll buy your tomatoes. There is a lot of seed growing but most of it is starting out organic. This is a market that really likes organic."

Advocacy is needed to assure retailers, consumers, processors and farmers that hemp and products made from hemp are legal. Some District Attorneys around the state still want to prosecute those in the hemp industry. Uncertainty about transporting raw hemp also creates problems.

"There is still uncertainty about crossing state lines, even though this is allowed under the federal and state hemp pilot program," said Mr. Konopacki. "A nationwide market wouldn't have these problems. There's not a lot of flexibility."

Efforts to add hemp as a commodity to the national farm bill could help resolve transportation problems and, perhaps, ease marketing concerns. U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell introduced bipartisan language to the Senate version of the 2018 Farm Bill that would legalize growing the plant and allow states to set up the best system for regulation. Both Wisconsin U.S. Senators cosponsored the proposal.

Hemp is one of the few bright spots in Wisconsin's agriculture community. WFBF's

Rob Richard noted, “The economic hardship and morale of farmers is really low right now.” Farmers are looking for alternatives and hemp provides some hope for better cash flow.

Some farmers are sitting on the fence watching their neighbors solve problems related to agronomy and marketing. “I really think you are going to see big growth in Year Two and Year Three,” Mr. Richard said.

Farmers looking for help finding a market for their product or folks interested in being advocates should contact the Wisconsin Hemp Alliance. Especially helpful are people willing to buy hemp.

“If you are a processor or buyer, we know of farmers who would like to connect with you!” Folks can reach Larry Konopacki and the Wisconsin Hemp Alliance at info@wishemp.org.

- Vinehout, D-Alma, represents the 31st Senate District.