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Health & Medicine 2/11/02

The munchies crackdown

The feds go after hemp in power bars and chips

BY ANDREW CURRY

Cannabis sativa is perhaps America's most recognizable and controversial plant. Its distinctive nine-part leaf has been a counterculture symbol for decades, and its buds and leaves—the source of marijuana—still account for the biggest chunk of the federal government's war on drugs.

But hold on. Cannabis is also hemp, a hardy plant that's been grown for fiber and food all over the world for centuries. The past few years have seen a surge in interest in more-legitimate uses for the cannabis plant, from clothes and moisturizers to food. Nutritionists say the hemp plant's seeds are full of essential fatty acids and polyunsaturated fats—the "good fats" doctors recommend to help reduce cholesterol and heart disease—along with easily digested proteins, vitamin E, and antioxidants. The seeds are being added to health foods ranging from hemp chips and granola to oil, most made from hemp grown in Canada. Growing hemp is illegal in the United States.

The buzz.

The botanical connection between hemp and marijuana has brought this increasingly popular health food under the scrutiny of the Drug Enforcement Administration. An interim DEA decision in October placed "foods and beverages that contain THC"—the psychoactive compound in marijuana—in the same category as heroin and LSD and gave manufacturers and retailers un-til this week to get rid of their stocks.

The hemp industry is upset. Producers and retailers point out that in terms of drug content, poppy seed bagels are closer to heroin than a hemp granola bar is to a joint. Though both come from the same species, "they're distinct varieties," says hemp manufacturer John Roulac. Today, the industrial hemp seeds used to produce hemp oil, granola bars, cereal, and tortilla chips lack all but trace amounts of THC. "It's like the difference between a bell pepper and a chili pepper," Roulac says. "One's got a huge oomph, and one doesn't."

The industry recognizes that the DEA has had reason for concern. Before hemp farming was legalized in Canada in 1998, most industrial hemp was imported from China, where processing standards were low and THC levels were easily detectable and often quite high. People sometimes failed drug tests after eating hemp foods, and others used hemp foods as an excuse for positive marijuana test results.

Manufacturers say they've cleaned up their act—and their seeds. Improved processing and new hemp strains have cut THC content to less than 5 parts per million, compared with 50,000 to 200,000 parts per million in marijuana. Major health food chains like Wild Oats and Whole Foods say they plan to keep hemp foods on their shelves, provided the manufacturers' independent lab tests don't turn up THC. Meanwhile, the agency considers any THC in food "subject to potential enforcement." Says DEA Administrator Asa Hutchinson: "We're not against the hemp industry. We're against the THC."

And that has manufacturers worried. "Everyone's afraid the DEA is going to shut down a multimillion-dollar industry," says Nature's Path founder Arran Stephens. "It all depends on how ridiculous they want to be." But for now, health nuts are likely to keep munching.

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