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Check aisle 7 for war on drugs

Law: Here's the latest buzz: The DEA has ordered all hemp foods off grocers' shelves.

By Arthur Hirsch
Sun Staff
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There's a guy you have to know to get the stuff. Isn't there always? You know a little something about him and vice versa, so everything's cool.

In hours the feds will put down the hammer and then things will really get tense. This should be easy. A phone call, a short drive, and you make the hemp connection.

No time to waste. You drive into a wind-whipped parking lot, slipping into the dim, greasy lamp light, going through the steps again. No surprises pal, not tonight. Save it for your birthday.

You walk into the place through the automatic doors. Look to the left, the right. Cool. Then past the produce section. It all looks better than a picture in a magazine: the peppers, leeks, mangos. The mushrooms you can't pronounce, the olives with names like VIPs at the World Economic Forum. You need shades to protect your eyes from the sheen off the Braeburn apples.

No wonder they call it "Fresh Fields."

You're running through every detail, including the matter of how it came to this. What's the sense of thinking about it? Just get the stuff. Just find the guy and get the frozen hemp waffles. And the hemp granola. Just put down the cash and don't look at anyone and don't think about how it came to this. It's another score, that's all.

How did it come to this?

The DEA speaks; you listen or you don't. It's your day in court.

The federal word came in October: as THC - a naturally occurring chemical in the plant - gets you high and is illegal, and as no one can say that hemp foods have absolutely no THC, and as there is no allowable THC standard in the United States, then hemp foods also must be illegal.

No matter that you can't get high on a trunkload of hemp food. That's not the issue.

The DEA calls it an "interpretive ruling." That means, this is what the law says. Until further notice, after Feb. 6, hemp food - not clothing or cosmetics - is verboten. Get it off the shelves. That means anything edible: the hempseed oil, the cookies, cereals, waffles, ice cream, salad dressings, tortilla chips, burgers, snack bars, cheese and whatever else they've cooked up in Hempland.

Hemp. It only sounds like one of the Three Stooges. The plant's been raised for centuries. Hemp fans like to talk about how George Washington and Thomas Jefferson grew it. During World War II, American farmers grew tons of it, the fibers used for war materials. It's the basis of a huge textile industry and a rather new and tiny U.S. food industry: maybe \$7 million in sales a year. Nutritionists say hemp seeds are good for you, rich in protein, vitamin E, amino acids and essential fatty acids.

Ah, but check out those leaves. Look familiar? Hemp is but part of a marijuana plant - species name *cannabis sativa* L. - that's been raised for purposes other than producing dope.

There's the rub with hemp. After all, no American's been issued a permit to grow the stuff in 50 years. Food companies have the seeds shipped in, mostly from Canada, but not before they remove the hull, which contains most of the THC, then sterilize the seeds so they can't be cultivated.

The details of this story can be daunting: demonstrations on Capitol Hill, a suit in federal court challenging the DEA. Canada's taking up the issue as a NAFTA violation.

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Never mind all that. You'll stroll into Fresh Fields real casual-like. You'll try not to crack up at the thought of gun-toting narcs rummaging through cases of gluten-free pancake mix looking for hemp veggie burgers. Imagine the patrons' alarm: "How could this happen here in Mount Washington, so far from The Corner?"

Tell it to the Family Research Council. The right-wing group figures hemp is a Trojan Drug Mule. Let in the hemp, and you'll soon legalize marijuana.

The details go on. They're howling in Hempland.

John Roulac, president of a hemp foods company in northern California, is angry, perplexed and bewildered. What's the DEA up to? he asks.

"Six times in three years they've changed their rules on whether hemp is legal," says Roulac, president of Nutiva. He also claims hemp foods have been seized by federal authorities.

Rogene Waite, spokeswoman for the DEA, says she's heard about no such thing. Must have been some other agency, she says.

"We haven't changed our policy," she says. The October ruling was made only because there were so many questions about hemp, which is not specifically mentioned in federal law.

Hemp fans say hemp is to marijuana as, say, animal feed corn is to sweet corn. They say there's at least as much opiate in poppy seeds as THC in hemp seeds. Bad comparison, says Waite, as federal law specifically exempts poppy seeds.

"What is the hurry?" to ban the foods without hearings, without consulting with the industry, asks David Neuman, VP of sales and marketing with Nature's Path, a hemp foods company based in Vancouver. "Nobody's getting sick or high from it, so why not just wait?"

Consider, he says: For purposes of food labels, it took the government 10 years to define "organic."

The DEA allowed 90 days to banish hemp foods, unless stores could produce letters saying a product has absolutely no THC. That's the law, says the DEA. Not trace amounts or infinitesimal amounts of the mind-bending agent THC - but none, zip.

The guy on the phone says Fresh Fields pulled the stuff early, late on Feb. 5, just to be safe. But ask for the guy when you come in around closing time. Cool.

Sure enough, the frozen waffle case reveals the long reach of the DEA. There are LifeStream's Mesa Sunrise, SoyPlus, FlaxPlus, 8 Grain Sesame frozen waffles. But no HempPlus.

Be cool. Just find the guy and get the stuff. Don't ask around, not in here. Next thing you know you're facing an ugly harangue about globalization. It's what they say about living on the wrong side of the DEA: So much of the downside is the places you have to go, the people you meet.

His employee badge just says "Rob." Mid-range Gen-Xer with a little goatee tuft, black-rimmed Perry Ellis eyeglasses. He's the night manager. 'Scuse us, "shift leader" in Fresh Fields talk.

So? The stuff? We talked on the phone?

He's off to "the back." So far so good. He's back before you can say "zero tolerance."

The package makes a reassuring heft under the arm - must be all those essential fatty acids. The lot's cold and getting colder. Could use something to take the chill off. Wonder if the liquor store's still open?

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