

Assembly OKs bill letting farmers grow hemp

By Tom Chorneau, Associated Press

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SACRAMENTO – A bill approved by the state Assembly Thursday would add California to the growing number of states seeking to legalize the cultivation of industrial hemp – a biological relative of marijuana.

Supporters claim that despite its family links, hemp is a completely safe product that could become a cash crop for California farmers because of its use in a long list of products from soap and cosmetics to rope, jewelry and even luggage.

But even if the measure eventually becomes law, farmers would still face hurdles to actually cultivate the plant because hemp contains trace amounts of a banned substance and may still fall under federal anti-drug rules.

The bill's author, Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, said the Assembly's passage of the measure marks an important milestone.

"This makes sense," said Leno. "It could provide an opportunity of great value to family farmers. This could be a bonanza of job growth."

The bill passed on a vote of 41-30. If senators approve it, it would need the governor's signature. A spokesman for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said he has not taken a position on the proposal.

Some critics complained that allowing hemp to be grown puts the state on a slippery slope.

"You pass industrial hemp today and then something else and then something else," said Assemblyman Dennis Mountjoy, R-Monrovia. "And then at some point you will get legalized marijuana."

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had classified hemp as a controlled substance because an average plant contains small amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the same drug that gives marijuana its intoxicating effect.

Analysts from the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) said there are also concerns that hemp farms could be used to hide marijuana plants.

But the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 2004 that the DEA did not have authority to regulate hemp. Still, Leno said it remains unclear if states have the authority to let

farmers cultivate the plants.

Processed hemp imported from other countries is sold throughout the U.S. for manufacturing products. A hemp trade group [the HIA] estimated the annual retail market in the U.S. at \$270 million.

A number of states have already passed laws aimed at allowing hemp farming, including Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia.

Although the vote Thursday in the Assembly was largely along party lines, Republican Chuck DeVore of Irvine joined Leno as a co-author.

"This measure does not allow the cultivation of marijuana," DeVore said. "All we are doing is legalizing in the United States what is already being done in [over] 30 different nations."

On the Net: Read the bill, AB 1147, at <http://www.assembly.ca.gov>

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