

Legalize industrial hemp

Fear of its drug content is unfounded

Opinion

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California businesses can import raw industrial hemp, a type of cannabis plant that has no drug-like properties, and they can manufacture, sell and distribute products made from it. Yet in one of the most absurd, anti-free market ironies of America's misguided war on drugs, California's farmers by law cannot grow it.

Again, industrial hemp is not a drug. But because of drug-war hysteria, industrial hemp has become politically linked erroneously to the marijuana plant. Instead of paying California farmers to grow a renewable, environmentally friendly crop that is no more harmful than carrots, hemp- product manufacturers must give their business to overseas farmers, while paying pointless import and transportation fees.

It's time for California to change that.

Since the early 1970s federal law has prohibited industrial hemp cultivation in the U.S. without a special permit from the Drug Enforcement Administration, but the DEA has only granted one such permit, ever, to a small experimental crop in Hawaii.

But a bill recently introduced in the state Legislature, from Bay-area Assemblyman Mark Leno, would allow California to circumvent the federal law. AB 1147 would allow the state Department of Food and Agriculture to issue licenses for farmers to grow and sell industrial hemp within the state. North Dakota approved a similar measure in 1999, and several other states, including Texas and Oregon, are considering allowing industrial hemp farming.

The federal ban on industrial hemp is arguably the most foolish of all drug-war prohibitions. Although hemp is a variety of the cannabis plant, it contains only trace amounts of the intoxicating ingredient of marijuana, known as THC. Experts say it is impossible for anyone to get high from smoking or ingesting industrial hemp.

Furthermore, legalized industrial hemp cultivation could have a tremendous positive economic impact for California. It can be used in hundreds of products including clothing and paper, cosmetics, food, paints and high-strength particle board. It is also highly renewable because a hemp crop can grow to 10 feet and higher in a matter of months, it can supply in a season the paper pulp equivalent to several decades worth of tree growth. It also requires less pesticide and water than cotton crops, so it holds promise as a supplement to cotton in clothing.

The DEA's primary argument against industrial hemp is that it could serve as a camouflage for illicit marijuana growers, but the argument appears flawed. According to horticulturists, marijuana growers would never mix their crops with industrial hemp because it would cross-pollinate and dramatically weaken the potency of marijuana. Some supporters of industrial hemp have suggested that the DEA and illegal marijuana growers are hemp's two strongest opponents, and they're probably right.

Even so, the Leno bill does contain safeguards against marijuana cultivation. It would require testing to ensure THC levels in the crop did not exceed trace amounts, and would prohibit anyone with a criminal conviction from growing hemp.

California ought to allow farmers to grow industrial hemp. The Legislature and Gov. Schwarzenegger, whose pro-business, pro-environmental platform would mesh perfectly with the promotion of industrial hemp, need to give Leno's bill speedy passage into law.

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