

Jondi Gumz, Reporter at Large: Hemp, hemp, hurrah!

By Jondi Gumz

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If organic food can go mainstream, is hemp clothing right behind?

With a cluster of garment retailers and wholesalers operating locally, Santa Cruz is in fine position to snag a share of an estimated \$270 million market, should California legalize cultivation of industrial hemp.

Although demand for products made of hemp has grown over the past decade, the plant has been tarred by its biological association with marijuana. Because of the U.S. ban adopted in 1937, hemp for industrial use is imported, mostly from China and Romania, although it's also grown in Canada.

Federal legislation, HR 3037, introduced last year to lift the ban is stalled despite the support of our local representative, Sam Farr. But there are new developments on other fronts:

- An informal European association for hemp processors gained official status last year. The group's fourth annual conference is planned for November in Cologne, Germany.
- A commercial enterprise, U.S. Hemp, opened a retail store in Santa Cruz in mid-June featuring all hemp products, including a wide selection of clothing.
- A bill to allow hemp farming under state license, AB 1147, quietly moved out of California's Senate Public Safety Committee on a 4-2 vote three weeks ago and is slated for a hearing in the Appropriations Committee in August. It passed the state Assembly, 44-32, and growers like Vanessa Bogenholm of Watsonville are hopeful.

Santa Cruz has been a leader in the hemp clothing market. Case in point: Ecolution, which is based in Santa Cruz, founded a factory in Romania to manufacture hemp products in 1990, four years before the creation of the Hemp Industries Association (HIA) trade group.

Avatar Imports, a wholesaler and retailer of clothing made from hemp and organic cotton, started in Brookdale in 1991, and has had a store in downtown Santa Cruz since 1999.

Richard Dash, who works out of Bonny Doon, has been designing hemp clothing since 1997. His products are sold online and locally at Avatar and EcoGoods a short walk away.

EcoGoods, which opened in Capitola 12 years ago, sells a variety of organic products, including hemp clothing. It's been in downtown Santa Cruz since 1996.

Goodhumans launched an online retail site in Santa Cruz in 2000. Hemp clothing is in its line of "environmentally responsible products."

U.S. Hemp is the first retail operation in Santa Cruz to focus entirely on hemp products. With a large space on Pacific Avenue near the main post office, it showcases hemp's versatility. Shoppers will find shirts, skirts, dresses, pants, hats, socks, backpacks, books and body lotions, as well as food items.

Monterey resident Leigh Waldenmeyer, who drove to Santa Cruz to buy fabric, happened upon U.S. Hemp and was intrigued.

"It's the first time I heard of all these new uses," she said. "I knew hemp was a plant, so it makes sense, but all of a sudden, it's out there."

Some business owners want to dominate their market, but not Avatar Imports partner Jeph Hemmer.

"I don't look at anybody as competition," he said. "The more in Santa Cruz, the better."

Still, I'm reluctant to predict that hemp's future is here. Here are two reasons from Jim Motavalli, editor of the environmental journal *E Magazine*.

"The hemp clothing industry is constrained somewhat by the lack of really large hemp production worldwide, and the U.S. ban on planting," he explained. "Also, hemp's producers make too many exaggerated claims."

Could hemp save forests logged to produce paper? Or hempseed oil replace diesel fuel? That's what advocates say.

Aaron Carvajal at U.S. Hemp, Marquita Garcia at Avatar Imports and Lily Ruderman at EcoGoods can't stop singing the praises of hemp's ability to grow without fertilizer and pesticides and leave nutrients in the soil for the next crop.

I can understand their enthusiasm, given that industrial hemp has so many uses, and that some of the newest clothing styles are quite chic.

Frankly, the problem is that hemp has a bad reputation. Ask a teen what he knows about hemp and he'll answer you: Rope or dope? Ask a banker, and he'll start to giggle.

Note to hemp lobbyists: California State Sen. Jeff Denham, who represents a major agriculture community, abstained on AB 1147 even though California Certified Organic Farmers, based in Santa Cruz, supports it. Denham's staff said he needed more information on hemp production and he'd also like to hear from law enforcement, which has yet to make its position known.

Advocates haven't helped their case with in-your-face green logos that seem to promote pot smoking rather than ecological benefits. What hemp needs is a makeover, so people in the mainstream will take it seriously.

In downtown Santa Cruz, Skateworks sells IPath sneakers made of hemp, but they blend right in with the rest of the merchandise. When Mervyns starts selling hemp clothing without advertising it as hemp, then hemp fashion will have arrived.

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On the Web

www.dpna.org

Hemp opponent Jeanette McDougal, retired drug prevention educator

www.greenfestival.com

Nov. 11-12 in San Francisco, 877-727-2179

www.thehia.org

Hemp Industries Association (HIA), non-profit trade group

www.jackherer.com

Wrote *The Emperor Wears No Clothes*, a history of hemp

www.votehemp.com

Campaign for legal cultivation of industrial hemp

Where hemp stands

Worldwide output in 2005 for three fiber crops:

Hemp fiber: 52,436 hectares

Flax fiber: 501,246 hectares

Cottonseed: 35,085,742 hectares

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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