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Assembly mulls industrial hemp bill

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SANTA CRUZ — Move over, strawberries?

Step aside, lettuce?

OK, that's probably an exaggeration. The top cash crops of the Central Coast likely won't be supplanted in economic importance, but the distant cousin of one of the area's more illicit crops could hold promise for the state's farmers: hemp.



□ Staff of Life's Curt Herrlich has his arms full of hemp food products. (Dan Coyro / Sentinel)

Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, is pushing a bill that would allow California farmers to grow industrial hemp. That comes about a year after the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the federal government did not have the authority to regulate hemp under the 1970 Controlled Substance Act.

Organic farmers are seeing green. Money, that is.

Supporters of AB 1147 say hemp could put more cash in farmer's pockets and help replenish the soil for nutrient-thirsty crops like berries.

"It would be great for organic farmers as a rotation crop," said Vanessa Bogenholm, who grows organic strawberries, raspberries and vegetables in the Pajaro Valley.

The plant fares better in more dry climates, but Bogenholm said it would be a good candidate in this area for growing in the summer months in between harvests of more traditional crops.

Bogenholm estimated hemp could produce about \$1,600 per acre for growers, growing to about 6 feet tall in 48 days.

Leno's measure has the support of the Santa Cruz-based California Certified Organic Farmers, a state trade association.

State Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, said he hadn't yet taken a position, but was studying the measure in light of its support from the organic farmers group. He said the bill's chances of success may lie with the position traditional farming organizations take.

"If the state Farm Bureau throws its weight behind it, it has a shot," Laird said.

John Eiskamp, a Pajaro Valley berry grower and board member with the county Farm Bureau, said he had no opinion about the bill, but didn't oppose it.

"If it's something that agriculture can benefit from, that's fine," Eiskamp said.

The California Farm Bureau has not taken a position on the bill, said spokesman Dave Kranz.

Backers extol the virtues of industrial hemp that is used for paper, clothing, rope and food products. It

is hailed for nutritional benefits because it contains amino acids and omega-6 oils.

Companies that make hemp-related products now have to get it from overseas farms.

John Roulac, founder of Sebastopol-based food company Nutiva, said the company will use about 3,500 acres of hemp this year and estimates it will need about 10,000 acres by 2008. The company now gets its hemp from farms in Western Canada for products like its energy bars, protein powder and hemp oil.

"All that money we're sending to Canadian farms could go to California farmers," Roulac said.

Sales of food products made with hemp have found a niche in recent years, said Scott Mason, grocers manager at Staff of Life.

"They haven't really grown, but they haven't fallen off," Mason said. "They've sustained their popularity."

Of course, the big obstacle for a bill getting passed is hemp's relationship to marijuana. While they come from the same family, the level of psychoactive chemical in hemp, delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol, is less than 1 percent compared with 3 to 15 percent in marijuana.

Bogholm jokes a joint the size of a telephone pole wouldn't even give someone a headache.

The Drug Enforcement Administration sought to ban foods containing hemp in 2002, but backed off last year after the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruling.

A spokesman for the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy said he was not familiar with the bill, but that the federal government's policy on hemp was based on skepticism about its backers' intent.

"The federal government's hemp policies proceed from the understanding that hemp has been used as a Trojan horse of marijuana legalization," said Office of National Drug Control Policy spokesman Tom Riley.

Hemp production would be tightly controlled under Leno's bill.

Farmers wanting to grow hemp would be required to obtain a license from the state Department of Food and Agriculture and would not be authorized to sell or trade hemp seed outside California. They also would report on what companies buy their hemp.

A person with a criminal conviction would be ineligible for a license, according to the bill.

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