

Legal hemp farming proposed in California

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger / Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO — California farmers could legally grow hemp used to make clothes, bath products and food under a bill introduced this week in the state Legislature.

Assembly Bill 1147 would allow farmers to sell hemp seed, oil and fiber to California businesses that import hemp from outside the United States, usually from Canada.

The change would invigorate California's farming industry at a time when business is tough, said Assembly Member Mark Leno, the San Francisco Democrat who is sponsoring the bill.

"We need to be smart and thoughtful about the future of agriculture in California and how we can make sure California stays competitive," Leno said. "Hemp can play a great role in addressing those issues."

Hemp products are manufactured and sold in the United States in the form of paper, cloth, canvas, rope, food and body-care products. In 2002, hemp products were a \$150 million industry in North America.

But the federal government outlaws the farming of hemp without a special permit, classifying it as a controlled substance.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has resisted efforts to expand hemp farming, concerned that it would make it more difficult to spot illegal marijuana gardens.

"It would be very difficult to distinguish between hemp and marijuana," said Richard Meyer, a special agent with the DEA in San Francisco.

Hemp and marijuana come from the same type of plant, but marijuana contains much higher levels of mood-altering ingredient tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC.

In the past decade, more than 25 states have passed laws calling for studies of hemp farming on the economy.

Efforts in California have not been as successful. State legislation directing the University of California to study the economic potential of hemp crops cleared the Assembly and Senate in 2002 but was vetoed by then-Gov. Gray Davis.

Farmers who grow organic food are supporting the legislation.

Vanessa Bogenholm, chairwoman of the California Certified Organic Farmers board, said hemp rotates well with other crops such as tomatoes and cotton. Hemp is good for the soil and does not require heavy pesticides, she said.

Some farmers are excited about the potential financial benefits.

Among them is Allen Garcia, who farms organic rice near Chico. Farmers struggling in the global marketplace could find a niche in growing hemp, he said.

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