

Is Hemp the New Miracle Crop for Agriculture?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I have honestly lost track of how many “new miracle crops that are going to save agriculture” I have seen come and go. So let me just say up front that there are no miracle crops. For any crop to be a viable option for anywhere there are several things you have to have. First of all the right climate to grow the crop. That’s soil, appropriate moisture either naturally or via irrigation, proper length of growing season and appropriate temperatures. Then you need to have the knowledge of how to grow, harvest and market the crop. Of course you also need to have someplace to sell it whether it’s directly to the consumer or to a processor who will take the raw commodity and move it on to the next step.

Industrial hemp has been getting a lot of publicity and talk in recent months. Changes in the latest Farm Bill as well as changes in Kansas Statutes last year created an opportunity for industrial hemp to be grown in Kansas. Over half of the states now have legislation allowing for industrial hemp to be grown. None of these states have been doing it for any length of time. They are taking baby steps and everyone is learning together. Hemp production is nothing new to Kansas. If you look at reports of agriculture production for the state from the late 1800s and early 1900s you will find that several thousand acres was grown in the state, primarily for fiber likely used to make ropes. However, in the late 1930s, all hemp production was outlawed.

We need to make a strong differentiation between industrial hemp and medical marijuana or recreational cannabis. The latter two are grown, legally or illegally, for their THC content, a drug that produces the intoxication. In these two products, the level of THC can be anywhere from 10 to nearly 30%. By law, industrial hemp can not have a THC level higher than 0.03%. Industrial hemp is being grown for fiber, seed or the oil in the female flowers cannabidiol, or simply CBD. CBD has the highest value for producers, but fiber and seed has potential for production as well.

This is the first growing season that we will have been able to legally grow industrial hemp. The process is long and complicated to obtain a permit to produce or process industrial hemp. In fact the deadline to apply for a permit was March 1. All permits, at least for 2019 in Kansas, were only for “research” on growing and processing. The requirements and the regulations are extensive. If you want to see all 60+ pages, come on down to my office and I will give you a copy. They’re also available on line. Those applications for permits are now being reviewed and I have no idea where any production or processing will be.

Is industrial hemp a miracle crop? No. Can we grow it here? Yes. We see wild hemp growing in ditches and waste areas all the time. But growing industrial hemp is expensive and involves a lot of hand labor. There are no herbicides labeled for use in hemp, there are no pesticides labeled for controlling insects and diseases. Yes, you will get weeds in hemp fields and yes, there are insects and diseases that attack hemp plants.

The bigger challenge for hemp production in Kansas, at least for the next few years, is where will you market your raw commodity. How far do you have to truck what you grow to sell it? Whenever we look at speciality crops, be it hops or hemp, ginger or ginseng, the question is always, where do you sell it. We can grow a lot of different plants around here, but can you sell it and make enough money to make it profitable. That is always the challenge and will be the challenge with this latest miracle crop.