

DR. BRONNER'S MAGIC SOAPS WILL BE IMPROVED WITH HEMP OIL. READ ON!

The latest buzz on hemp

U.S. farmers want the ban on cultivating the plant lifted

BY ELISE ACKERMAN

Times sure are tough for North Dakota farmers like David Monson. First there were floods, then heavy snow, pelting rains, and disease that devastated the crops. Last summer, Monson grimly tended his wheat, barley, and canola fields in Osnabrock and watched neighboring farms go bust. In the fall, his profit was a paltry \$25 an acre. Meanwhile, 20 miles away, across the border in Canada, Brian McElroy had cut back on wheat and planted his first crop of industrial hemp. He earned \$225 an acre.

Last year's Canadian hemp harvest was the first since the 1930s, when antimarijuana movies like *Reefer Madness* helped ignite a backlash. One upshot was a crackdown on hemp, marijuana's non-psychoactive cousin, in Canada and the United States. Now, despairing U.S. farmers are calling on the federal government to follow Canada's lead and legalize the crop. They tout industrial hemp, which contains only negligible amounts of the mind-altering chemical THC, as

lucrative, versatile, and environmentally friendly. Last month, the Virginia legislature endorsed "controlled, experimental cultivation of the plant. Similar pro-hemp action is pending in 11 other state legislatures, including Hawaii and Vermont.

Pushing product. Worldwide sales of hemp products are booming. According to Hemptech, a California consulting company, global hemp sales rose from less than \$3 million in 1993 to \$75 million in 1997, the latest figures available. Sales in the United States alone reached \$50 million. (Despite the ban on cultivation, the U.S. government does permit sales of hemp products.)

But Washington has resisted calls to legalize hemp farming. Unless the president issues an executive order removing hemp from the Drug Enforcement Administration's controlled-substance list, or the DEA itself takes action, the states' efforts to scrap the ban ultimately will fail. (President Clinton has yet to state his official position on the plant, but Hempen Gold, a cream ale brewed from hemp seeds, was recently served on Air Force One.)

The Office of National Drug Control Policy insists that permitting hemp farming would send the wrong message to the public, especially to young people. "Legalizing hemp production may mean the de facto legalization of marijuana cultivation," the agency warns in a statement, claiming that marijuana plants could be hidden in fields of industrial hemp.

But an unlikely hemp proponent, former CIA Director R James Woolsey, says the agency is blowing smoke. Not only are densely planted hemp fields uncondusive to marijuana cultivation but, Woolsey maintains, "If you want to get rid of marijuana, there's nothing better to do than plant a lot of industrial hemp." The reason is that hemp cross-pollinates with marijuana, lowering its potency. Woolsey, who represents the North American Industrial Hemp Council, a lobbying group, emphasizes that he opposes legalizing marijuana. The bottom line, he says, is that hemp is "extremely useful" in a wide range of industrial applications.

It's also a plant with a history. In colonial America, industrial

hemp was used to manufacture sails, rope, paper, and cloth. Thomas Jefferson cultivated hemp. Drafts of the Declaration of Independence were written on hemp-fiber paper. Modern-day hemp products include cosmetics, carpets, salad oil, and snacks, as well as construction materials and biodegradable auto parts. Hemp fibers are used in the trunk and door panels of the German manufactured 5 and 7 series BMW, and Ford is studying their potential for use in radiator grills.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government continues to spend money uprooting hemp. According to DEA figures, 98 percent of the \$7.3 million the government spent on marijuana eradication programs last year went to kill ditchweed, a type of industrial hemp that grows wild.

Frustrated North Dakota farmers want to persuade the government to stop just saying "No" to hemp. This year, Monson, who also serves in the state legislature, sponsored three pro-hemp bills. Their message: "We in the North Dakota believe this is a legitimate crop that can make us some money, help the environment, and maybe save some family farms."

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