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The Hype About Hemp

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: In April 2018 the Kansas Governor signed a bill that enacted the Alternative Crop Research Act and led to the production of industrial hemp being legal in Kansas. This bill made Kansas one of 42 states where industrial hemp is legal to grow. The Kansas Department of Agriculture reported that there were 207 growers in 2019. However, these growers faced challenges due to hemp production being new in Kansas and no available information regarding the best practices for growing industrial hemp in the Kansas climate and soils. There are two different varieties of industrial hemp that can be grown, one is a grain and fiber crop and the other is grown for cannabidiol (CBD oil). Last year the majority of people in Kansas who grew industrial hemp grew the variety for CBD oil production.

While there is a lot of interest in growing industrial hemp in Kansas and nationwide, there are also many who are hesitate and waiting to see if the interest in industrial hemp will last and there will be a reliable market for it, or if it is just the latest fad. To find out more about industrial hemp production in Kansas, Kansas State University did industrial hemp research trials at three locations across the state. Recently, Kansas State University Research and Extension held an Industrial Hemp Conference in Wichita where researchers discussed what they have learned from the research trials and the challenges industrial hemp growers face.

It seems that when industrial hemp is discussed it is commonly in relation to CBD oil production. However, industrial hemp can also be grown for grain and fiber production. Although both types are referred to as industrial hemp there are differences between the two varieties and how they are grown. Grain and Fiber Industrial Hemp is grown from seed and both male and female plants are grown, with pollen being necessary for Grain and Fiber Industrial Hemp to grow. Grain and Fiber Industrial hemp rarely has tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) levels that go above the .3 percent limit and it is considered an agronomy crop that is grown in fields, with the grain or stem being harvested. Industrial hemp for CBD oil production is grown from clones and only female plants are grown. When industrial hemp is grown for CBD oil pollen is considered the enemy and is not needed or wanted as pollination increases the THC levels of the plant. This type of hemp is commonly grown in green houses and is considered to be a horticulture crop with the flowers being the part of the plant that is harvested.

Two of the main challenges that industrial hemp growers in Kansas have are pest management and disease control. Controlling pests is one of the biggest challenges growers face, because there are currently no pesticides approved in the state of Kansas for use on industrial hemp. It is also important to note that pesticides have been found to raise THC levels in plants, and if the THC level is above .3 percent the whole plant must be destroyed. The common pests for Grain and Fiber Industrial Hemp are aphids, cucumber beetle, Eurasian Hemp Borer, caterpillar, and birds. Common pests for CBD Hemp are aphids, army worms, and russet mites. Insect and mite pests will feed on the leaves, stem, and the bulb/seeds of the plant. To prevent or get ahead of pest damage researchers recommend scouting fields at least once a week to look for signs of insect damage, making sure to check the underside of the leaf. Forceful water spray, spraying water on plants that you notice harmful insects on, to remove the insects from the plant, or planting trap crops around the field where industrial hemp is planted are a couple options researchers recommend to help prevent insect damage to plants. Trap crops are plants insects will find more desirable and are planted so the insects will eat those plants instead of the industrial hemp. When it comes to disease, researchers said it is important to remember that what may initially look like disease could actually be damage to the plant caused by insects or the environment. Although, it is common for industrial hemp to get viruses and fungal diseases that favor humid conditions, especially with varieties grown in green houses for CBD oil production. To help prevent disease it is important to avoid puddles of water and buildup of plant debris in the greenhouse. Common damage to industrial hemp grown for CBD oil that results from an unfavorable environment is powdery mildew and gray mold. Another challenge growers face once the crop has been grown and harvested is selling their crop. At the time of the K-State Industrial Hemp Conference it was reported that only a third of Kansas growers had sold their crop, researchers noted that while there are many uses for hemp fiber it needs to be marketed.

While growing industrial hemp comes with challenges related to pest and disease control and there is still work to be done when it comes to finding a market for industrial hemp once it has been harvested. There is also progress being made in developing pesticides that are approved to use on Industrial Hemp and researchers studying the most effective ways to grow industrial hemp for both for CBD oil and grain and fiber production.

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