

# Growing An American Hemp Fiber Industry

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**Abstract:** The bulk of the industrial hemp grown in America up to and including 2021 has been for the CBD extraction market. Virtually no domestic hemp is destined for the fiber market which includes hemp paper, hemp textiles, building materials, etc. Hemp farmers and hemp processors need to build the American hemp fiber market in unison to ensure that all participants are sustainably profitable as the industry grows and matures.

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The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 (a.k.a. The Farm Bill) legalized industrial hemp at the federal level. Hemp grown for CBD extraction soon dominated the market. During the Green Rush that ensued, too much was grown and prices plummeted. As a result many farmers abandoned hemp as a crop.

Some farmers are exploring hemp for its fiber potential. Before products like hempcrete, paper, and textiles can go mainstream several things need to occur in order to create a profitable industry. The challenge will be for the embryonic hemp fiber market to mature into an integrated group of players. Everyone needs to work towards the same goals.

## **It all begins with the plant.**

Not all hemp plants are the same. If you want to sell to grocery stores you better grow sweet corn not field corn. The same is true with hemp. With almost everyone growing high CBD cultivars farmers have all but ignored growing hemp for fiber. Until hemp farmers grow fiber hemp plants the industry can't get off the ground.

## **The only way to make money in the hemp fiber market at scale.**

If the hemp fiber market is to grow, farmers need to grow literally tons of hemp fiber. No one will invest in new manufacturing plants if the raw materials aren't available. Manufacturers require

reliable suppliers who can supply increasing amounts as the industry matures. Fiber hemp needs to be grown to match the acreage of corn, wheat, soy, and other conventional commodity crops.

## **Hemp farmers and their manufacturing partners need to be close to each other.**

The closer hemp is to processing facilities the lower the transportation costs. The longer the haul, the lower the profits. Sawmills aren't in the desert; they're close to forests. Hemp fiber farms need to be huge and if they're clustered together in one region all the better.

## **Only grow what you can sell.**

Growing is one thing, harvesting and shipping are another. Farmers who deliver hemp that dovetails into their customers' workflow can establish long term relationships which is what both parties want and need.

## **Hemp fiber doesn't have an expiration date.**

Hemp is here to stay and the fiber market will grow over time. Dry harvested hemp can be stored until the market catches up. Store it and they will come.

## **Hemp should be part of one's rotation.**

Growing industrial hemp doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing decision. For most farmers it shouldn't be. Hemp can be incorporated into a 3 year rotation. Smart farmers will shift to no till,

cover crops, and other regenerative practices especially because there are restrictions on pesticides that can be used with hemp. “Organic domestic hemp fiber” has a nice ring to it.

### **Hemp isn't corn, wheat, or soybeans.**

Hemp is a new crop in America. Farmers need to learn about hemp and what it takes to grow it successfully. Hemp isn't corn or wheat, apples or potatoes. 4H didn't teach it and county extension agents are unprepared. Some ag schools are starting to get involved but for conventional farmers, the learning curve can be steep and expensive. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll gain experience. Like any entrepreneurial activity, there's risk and reward. Budget wisely, set realistic expectations, share with other farmers, and be flexible. There's absolutely no reason American farmers can't be at the forefront of the global hemp fiber industry.

### **How today's hemp farmer fits into the [non-]existing hemp industry**

Until there are processing mills they can sell to, farmers aren't going to plant large fiber hemp crops. To get to the end products desired by hemp fiber customers, a significant amount of post harvest processing is required. How much of that post harvest processing can be performed on the farm? How much additional time and labor is involved? Will those additional costs pencil out for the farmer?

### **Hemp as a cover crop**

Farmers interested in growing hemp should consider planting it as a cover crop. Even if it's just as an organic weed suppression method or to capture and build soil carbon, cover cropping with hemp is an excellent opportunity for a farmer to learn about how it will perform at their location with minimal commitment beyond seed cost.

**Bonus:** Every hemp farmer lives in fear that their harvest will have over 0.3% THC the federal limit.

When a crop goes hot like that it needs to be destroyed. Too much THC and your whole farm goes up in flames, literally. The best quality fiber is from hemp that's harvested *before* it flowers. That means that farmers that grow for the fiber market will never, ever go over 0.3% THC because their plants won't have any flowers.

Yes, the fiber hemp industry in America is young, bordering on immature. It may not be easy or profitable now but it's only going to grow from here. Those that start now will enjoy a head start. Invest in the future without delay. LeBlanc CNE is all in on fiber hemp. We invite you to join us.

### ***Further reading:***

#### ***Pack It Up,***

<https://issuu.com/nwleaf/docs/northwestleaffeb2021>, page 20

#### ***Stop Growing Hemp,***

[https://issuu.com/nwleaf/docs/northwestleaf\\_june2021](https://issuu.com/nwleaf/docs/northwestleaf_june2021), page 16

#### ***Hempcrete The New Up and Comer,***

<https://issuu.com/nwleaf/docs/northwestleafnov2019>, page 22

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