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Hemp's Budding Success in the Mountain State



Kent Leonhardt
West Virginia Department
of Agriculture

Kent Leonhardt was elected West Virginia's Commissioner of Agriculture in 2016. A retired Lieutenant Colonel of the United States Marine Corps with 20 years of service, he has spent the last two decades working on his 380-acre farm in Monongalia County, West Virginia. Leonhardt previously served in the West Virginia State Senate, representing the state's second senatorial district.

When leaders of our state get together, the same question inevitably dominates the conversation: How do we diversify our economy while transitioning away from extraction industries? My typical response is we should focus on making West Virginia a "cornucopia of specialty crops." This answer should come as no surprise to anyone who knows me from my tenure as a West Virginia State Senator or my current role as the Commissioner of Agriculture. It's easy to be a vocal proponent of agriculture because those who work within the industry are some of the hardest working individuals in our country. They understand what it truly takes to make something out of nothing. It is more difficult to get other leaders, especially those less connected to agriculture, to see the \$7 billion opportunity before us. The good

news is we now have a shining example of a booming agricultural industry here in the Mountain State: industrial hemp.

Foresight by the West Virginia Legislature in 2017 allowed West Virginia farmers, for the first time ever, to begin growing industrial hemp for commercial purposes. Our leaders in Congress, led by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, followed suit with the 2018 Farm Bill, legalizing a new cash crop across the United States. Just one year after this sweeping legislation was signed into law by President Donald Trump, West Virginia's hemp industry is booming. From 2017 to 2019, we have seen the number of hemp farmers jump from 46 to 178 while the acreage has quadrupled. Heading into the 2020 growing season, the West Virginia Department of Agriculture has received

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nearly 500 applications for those wanting to join the movement.

Other economic development projects should take note of what our industrial hemp farmers are doing. In just a few years, the state's industrial hemp program has moved from purely research orientated to a thriving economic opportunity. The fact that the number of farmers and acreage levels have grown this dramatically means we must be doing something right. Those who are passionate about the industry have been screaming about industrial hemp's potential for years. They have all told us West Virginia can and will be known as a hemp state if we just put the right program in place. Based on



the numbers and the excitement, West Virginia is on its way to being known as an ideal location to tap into this emerging industry.

Photo Caption *An industrial hemp crop at Cool Ridge Farm in Raleigh County, West Virginia takes root.*

So far, we have producers, a great regulatory environment and momentum on our side. But for the industry to continue to grow and prosper, we need to keep all this raw material being grown within our state's borders. To foster processing, as well as production development, processors need to come together with producers in an all-out effort to manufacture industrial hemp products right here in the Mountain State. The people of our state have seen too many hopeful promises fail to come to fruition. For industrial hemp to not fall into the same category, we need to support processors opening their doors in West Virginia or they may choose another location for their businesses.

Importantly, all the growth in this industry has been happening despite uncertainty from our federal partners. Now that the USDA has issued its proposed rules, we know industry oversight will continue to rest with individual state departments of agriculture, with approval by the USDA. The good news is, West Virginia's current regulations are similar to those proposed at the federal level. This means our farmers are already well versed on what will be expected of them under a fully legal industrial hemp program.

West Virginia can become a national voice for industrial hemp. This is an opportunity we cannot miss. And, with the help of our producers and government leaders in West Virginia, we won't. 