

Hemp

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“Spec,” he explained, refers to the tolerable levels of mold, ecoli, bacteria, and other impurities that can be present in food grade hemp grain. If the product passes inspection, it can be sold as a food item similar to quinoa and be sprinkled on organic health bars or added to certain pastas. If the grain falls below the quality accepted by Canadian standards – the standard used in the U.S. market – it is deemed industrial grade, and is far less valuable.

The markets for corn and soybeans are terrible right now, he said, “so farmers are looking for other opportunities and people are jumping in thinking they’ll ride the wave on hemp production.”

Gesturing to a small plastic bag of processed hemp grain, he added, “it’s a teaser, because if this grain right here had made food grade, it would be the highest grossing crop I’ve ever grown on a per-acre basis. But if it doesn’t

had to sell their hemp grain in the industrial market, where it likely ended up as bird seed or squeezed for industrial oil. Compared to food grade, industrial grade sells for about ten cents on the dollar, according to Nate.

Of the 20,000 or-so uses for industrial hemp, the primary markets currently consist of CBD oil (a hemp extract used as a health supplement), fiber and grain.

The Hultgrens opted for hemp grain due to the specialized, laboratory-like nature of CBD farming, and a limited market for fiber.

Hemp, itself, Nate said, makes for a great organic crop as it grows extremely quickly and chokes out surrounding weeds.

As a short season crop, the Hultgrens were able to plant on June 15, and expect to harvest around September 15.

Prior to



Nate Hultgren’s son, Elias, stands among a crop of hemp on July 20. For hemp, late July is in the middle of the growing season, as planting takes place on June 15, and harvest on Sept. 15. During this stage in the season, hemp can grow up to three-quarters of an inch per week.

ipation in the pilot program. Nate also needed to undergo a background check, submit fingerprints to the Kandiyohi County Sheriff’s Office and, because no seeds are grown in Minnesota, attain an additional permit from the Department of Agriculture to import seeds from out of state.

As a relative of marijuana, hemp crops also are tested regularly to ensure they are not above the 0.3% limit for tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive compound in marijuana. If samples test above this limit, the crop is ordered to be destroyed. (In some cases, levels in excess of the 0.3% limit can occur by accident due to cross-pollination when male hemp plants are grown near female plants that are being used for production of CBD.)

Planting and cultivation is simple enough, requiring little more than a conventional

grain drill to plant seeds as one would plant wheat, an irrigation system and fertilization via turkey litter. (However, Nate notes that in preparation for planting this season’s crop, the ground was tilled no less than five times.)

Despite the relatively low-maintenance cultivation process, harvest is far more labor-intensive.

Once the heads turn from green to a brownish yellow, Nate uses a conventional combine rigged with a soybean head to clip the top grain portion from the plant (roughly four feet off the ground) and leave the fiber behind.

From there, the plants must be dried from 20% moisture to 8-9%. “That’s a challenge, because you can’t use conventional drying methods like you would with corn, where you can use 200-degree heat,” he said. “You need really low levels of heat to get that hemp grain dried down.

“The biomass (non-food plant matter) is even more of a challenge because you’re harvesting at about 50% moisture for CBD, but you need to get it to 16-18% for storage. That’s maybe what got us last season

– we thought we had a good product in the bin, but due to [moisture], we had higher microbial levels and mold.”

As moisture is so detrimental to the product, aeration of hemp must be performed as soon as possible. Yet because hemp does not keep well on trucks, transport from the farm to the storage bins can only be performed in small loads.

“The last step is the hardest part – getting the check,” Nate said.

While he believes there is a future in hemp production in the U.S., especially with grain and fiber, Nate advises those considering venturing into the hemp market to be aware of the risk.

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” he said. “You’re not automatically going to get rich, and you’re taking a lot of risks. [...] Don’t assume just because you have a contract to grow hemp that you’re going to get paid for that hemp.”

Because farmers run the risk of their hemp not meeting “spec,” or not having a market to sell to, oftentimes the only money that changes hands, he said, are “bad actors” taking advantage of farmers who are

planting by the seed.

Future prospects

Like Hultgren, Kim Larson, Vice Chair of a hemp-focused subcommittee of the County’s Agriculture and Renewable Energy Development (Ag) Committee, also believes there is a future in industrial hemp, provided there is a market for it.

On the positive side, he said, “hemp has been growing around the world for a long, long time. It can be a crop.” Larson added that he sees “great opportunity” in the future for fiber, grain and CBD oil, and expects interest to continue to grow.

However, Larson worries that the industry is growing too fast for farmers to safely invest in production.

“The negative side, would be that it’s the wild, wild west,” he said. “I mean, this is moving so fast in the U.S., that there’s important stuff that can’t keep up.

“An example would be that there’s no crop insurance here. I can have some security

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Date _____