

Californians to defy US hemp ban

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California farmers are on a high after the liberal state moved to overturn part of a 70-year-old United States ban on growing and harvesting cannabis plants.

But those hoping that the so-called Golden State is about to become a marijuana smokers' paradise will be disappointed. The California proposal relates only to the cultivation of industrial hemp, used in the manufacture of items such as cosmetics, food, paper and clothing.

"Hemp bears no more resemblance to marijuana than a poodle bears to a wolf," said Tom McClintock, a Republican state senator who backed legislation that would reverse one key section of a 1937 law banning the growth of all types of the plant. "You'd die from smoke inhalation before you'd get high."

The hemp issue has been burning slowly for decades. Farmers including the former US presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson grew the plants on their land. But the wide-ranging federal ban put an end to that.

Those who want it lifted argue that industrial hemp bears no relation to marijuana because it contains only trace amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient in marijuana.

National drug-control policy opposes the legalisation of hemp because it argues that crops could be mixed with marijuana plants and would be very hard to detect.

"California is a great climate to grow pot in, and no one from law enforcement is going through the fields to do a chemical analysis of different plants," said a drug-control official.

While six states have passed Bills supporting hemp farming, California's is the first to mount a direct challenge to the federal ban by arguing that no special permit would be needed from the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The final say now rests with California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, after the state's assembly approved the Industrial Hemp Farming Act by 44 votes to 29. He is thought unlikely to veto it.

The legislation requires that hemp crops be tested to ensure they do not contain THC. It does not specify how the testing would be carried out, but there is expected to be no shortage of volunteers.

Eric Steenstra, president of the Vote Hemp campaign, said the future of an industry worth \$270-million a year would be protected. "We thank legislators from both parties that listened to the facts about industrial hemp and made a historic decision to bring back the crop," he said.

"It's a major accomplishment for thousands of environmentally conscious voters, farmers and businesses."

California has a thriving industry in the manufacture of products made from hemp, which also includes luggage, toys, sports equipment, jewellery and

rope. Energy bars are particularly popular because hemp is high in essential fatty acids, protein, Vitamin B and fibre. Until now, however, raw materials have had to be imported from Canada, where hemp cultivation was legalised in 1998.

Those in the industry told the *New York Times* that the biggest flaw in the federal ban was that it did not take into account the genetic differences between industrial and THC-rich hemp.

"They want to lump together all things cannabis," said David Bronner, whose family business makes environmentally friendly cosmetics and snack products using hemp oil in Escondido, California. "You don't associate a poppy-seed bagel with opium."

Hemp thrived as a crop before the 1937 ban. It earned a temporary reprieve during World War II, when farmers were urged to "Grow Hemp for Victory" to help produce military equipment such as parachute cords and boots. - Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2006