

Garrett Simmons
[Lethbridge Herald](#)

Hemp Taking Root in Area Fields

Southern Alberta is known for its vast network of irrigation, which allows producers to grow several crops unique to this region.

Potatoes, sugar beets and the famous Taber corn are just some of the crops often associated with this part of the country.

But if a recent trend continues, our region may be home to a crop with a much less publicized presence in southern Alberta — hemp.

Already, about 30,000 acres of hemp is being grown in the area, a far cry from 2013's figures.

"It's starting to take off, and guys are interested in other crop alternatives instead of other traditional commodities," said Ken Coles, general manager of Farming Smarter here in Lethbridge.

Farming Smarter, Alberta Agriculture and representatives from the hemp industry gathered this week for a hemp crop walk at the research centre, as over 120 people met to learn more about the industry, including Farming Smarter's research initiatives.

"This is the first time we've had any hemp research going on in southern Alberta, so there's lots of interest and excitement in it," said Coles.

Ten varieties of hemp are being tested near Lethbridge, as Coles indicated the agronomy research is just in its first phase locally. A full proposal is in the works to examine all of the components involved in successfully growing hemp in this area, which include irrigation schedules, crop rotations and a number of other factors.

"There are a lot of intricacies involved in growing hemp," said Coles. "It's very finicky."

A number of first-time growers have taken the plunge this year. A company called Manitoba Harvest, which produces hemp-based food products, has contracted a number of acres with growers in southern Alberta.

Coles added those contracts make up the majority of hemp acres in the region, though he added there are a number of long-time growers who have been seeding hemp for years here. He estimated there were about 10,000 acres of hemp grown in southern Alberta last year, before the crop took off this year.

"The contracted hemp here is for grain production for the health-food industry," said Coles.

"Everyone is growing it here for seed."

But in the future, hemp may be poised to take ever a bigger leap forward, as a company has also expressed interest in building a hemp-processing plant, which will use fibres from the plant.

"There's so many things you can make from it," said Coles, as hemp can be made into clothes, rope or even paper. "It's a very good crop, and we know it can be grown here. Now it's more on the details of how to grow it."

Mike Duckett, of Stemia Group Ltd., who also presented as part of this week's event, said the company is still exploring a southern Alberta project, which would use 50,000 tonnes of hemp straw a year to make materials for the construction industry, including pulp and paper. He added that would require about 50,000-60,000 acres of hemp. He facility would also process flax.

Part of the work going forward will include studying the differences involved in growing hemp crops focused on seed production versus those grown for their fibres. For now, it all starts with the trials Farming Smarter is currently conducting, according to Coles.

"We'll see how the varieties perform this year and hopefully we'll have an expanded agronomy program next year."