

Why invest in growing hemp?

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Hemp is often seen as a new crop, and in retrospect, it still is. Only allowed to be grown in Canada since 1998, there haven't been the decades of research and experience with hemp as with other crops.

Jan Slaski, senior researcher with Alberta Innovates – Technology Futures, based in Vegreville Alberta, says that southern Alberta is starting to become a “hemp hub” of the country, as growing conditions for the crop are ideal.

Rising in popularity, the number of farmers looking to grow this crop has greatly increased. In the last 5-6 years, hemp acres in Canada have grown around 30 per cent, according to Slaski.

“The rapid industry growth is generated by high profitability of the crop. But the problem is, the crop can only be profitable if you can sell it. Right away here in 2017, we are expecting to have around 120-140,000 acres of hemp grown in Canada,” explains Slaski. “Why? Because there is high demand among hemp processors, food processors, and eventually fibre processors.”

If hemp is sold for its grain or oil, which is the main marketing option currently in Canada, then it is preferable

that it is seeded late, as farmers want the strong, fibrous stocks to be as short as possible.

“The main reason for this is with harvesting hemp, many farmers have problems with harvesting the crop,” says Slaski. “The stock or the stand, even in shorter varieties, grows to be very, very strong. If a grower doesn't know how to harvest hemp and postpones harvesting, and seeds very early, they can get into wrapping problems in their combines.”

Hemp also has benefits for the soil in which it's grown. “Hemp is a plant that develops a really large root system. So it leaves lots of organic biomass that is from decaying roots. Also, according to industrial hemp regulations, you can not move leaves, flowers, and chaff for the time being – it has to stay on the ground. So hemp leaves lots of organic biomass that improves the soil's physical properties,” emphasizes Slaski. “Overall, it leaves the soil healthier than before it was there.” He recommends for first time growers, to start with a small amount of acres.

“I would suggest to start with 40-60 acres of hemp if you've never grown before. Start small – this of course depends on the size of your farm. It's a manageable size for the average farmer. For whatever reason, if the crop fails, it won't be detrimental to your farm receipts,” says Slaski. “I always say if you know how to grow staple prairie crops, you don't necessarily know how to grow hemp. I cannot stress the importance enough of doing your homework, and educating yourself as much as possible on this crop.”

Slaski spoke at Farming Smarter's Plot Hop in Lethbridge, Alberta on June 8th.