**For Release Wednesday, July 24, 2019**

 **Capitol View
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**The Nebraska Press Association**

**Is the State Agriculture Department Slow-Walking Hemp Growers?**

The state senator who introduced the Nebraska Hemp Farming Act (LB657), which was passed and signed into law with immediate implementation, said he thinks the Governor and the Nebraska Department of Agriculture slow walked the process.

Slow walking is defined as delaying a request or command, dragging one's feet, stalling, obstructing, dragging out a process.

The department recently announced that 176 applications were filed to participate in the newly established industrial hemp 2019 growing season. That came after they opened the application process June 28 and gave growers, businesses and corporations one week to apply. The department hasn’t said how many were chosen, but they have been notifying those who were not successful.

That group includes Sen. Justin Wayne of Omaha, the bill’s sponsor, who said he applied on the manufacturing side so he could monitor the application process. Wayne said he’s been contacted by many people who said they wouldn’t be allowed to participate in the hemp program this year. He said two companies told him they’ll look at Iowa or Texas for hemp manufacturing.

Wayne said lawmakers had envisioned 1,000 applicants with 400 to 500 approved. After all, hemp was first grown in Nebraska in the late 1800s and many people grew it under government contract for World War II. So, it’s not a new crop and there’s sufficient evidence that it will grow well in Nebraska. The rub is that it would have had to be planted by June 1 to avoid a possible early frost.

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The Nebraska Hemp Farming Act, which Wayne worked on extensively, recognizes the plant as a viable agricultural crop and aligns state law with federal law — industrial hemp was legalized in the 2018 farm bill — regarding its cultivation, handling, marketing and processing. It is meant to open up new commercial markets for farmers and businesses through sale of hemp products. The agriculture department has reporting and enforcement requirements under the law. Plants are required to be submitted for testing to determine whether they contain less than 0.3 percent THC, the psychoactive drug in marijuana.

Wayne said his trust with the department is gone. Nebraska will be behind surrounding states. Kansas has approved 202 industrial hemp licenses, for 150 growers, 15 distributors, 30 processors and seven universities. More than 3,605 acres will be planted in the first year.

One of those who was denied, Firth farmer Diane Mulder, wanted to grow a quarter-acre for CBD oil. She said the state seemed to throw up obstacles for growers and businesses to get approvals, with the one-week-only time frame to apply, and requiring a background check that the State Patrol said would take five business days to get. She was able to apply because she found a place online to get a background check faster.

She attended a Midwest Hemp forum last month in David City and said many of those present were frustrated with the process.  She is hoping now there will be wider approval in January so she can participate.

Mulder said she was impressed by how many products come off of a hemp plant, including food, CBD oil, fuel, fiber and wood products. Another benefit is that its root system can pull impurities out of the soil.

The prospect for a new agricultural crop comes at a time when commodity prices are lagging on traditional crops. It was also something of a ray of hope countering the devastation of the bomb cyclone and massive statewide flooding and destruction in March.

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Robert Byrnes of Nebraska Screw Press in Lyons, a company focused on development of oil seed-processing systems throughout the United States and Central and South America, didn’t like the short window for applications. He called it a slap in the face to those who have been advocating for the crop for years. With his nationwide experience, he said the Nebraska government environment is unbelievably restrictive.

He questioned why the department insists on calling hemp production a pilot program. He said the department’s reluctance to diversifying agriculture is a paranoia reminiscent of the old 'reefer madness' mentality.

Given that one of the most vocal opponents of Wayne’s bill was a state senator who called hemp production a gateway for allowing recreational marijuana in Nebraska, I’d have to agree with Byrnes.

Give hemp a chance. It might just re-energize Nebraska farmers.

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***J.L. Schmidt has been*** *covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*