



Courtesy of Hemp Northwest

Hemp Makes a Comeback

Gorge entrepreneurs make health foods and other products from the newly legal plant

STORY BY DAVID HANSON • PHOTOS BY DAVID HANSON, COURTESY OF HEMP NORTHWEST AND BORING HEMP CO.

Hemp is the standard fiber of the world. It has great tensile strength and durability. It is used to produce more than 5,000 textile products, ranging from rope to fine laces, and the wood "burdes" remaining after the fiber has been removed contains more than seventy-seven percent cellulose, and can be used to produce more than 25,000 products, ranging from dynamite to cellophane.

Popular Mechanics, February 1938



Courtesy of Hemp Northwest



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A few months after *Popular Mechanics* magazine lauded hemp as the "New Billion Dollar Crop" in 1938, the U.S. government outlawed it, deeming the versatile Cannabis plant guilty by association with the nearly identical marijuana plant. Almost a century of American farmer knowledge around the cultivation and processing of hemp went into the dustbin. That has officially changed.

On Dec. 20, 2018, just before the government shutdown, President Trump signed into law the U.S. Farm Bill. Among many other things, the bill legalized the cultivation of hemp, a hearty plant that grows on every continent except Antarctica. With the new farm bill, Oregon farmers and retailers, some based in the Columbia River Gorge, are tapping in.

"We imagined hemp as the next big thing, the new apple of the Pacific Northwest," says Tonia Farman, a Hood River resident who started Hemp Northwest with her husband, Gregg Gnecco, in late 2017. Farman, whose dad was a cucumber farmer in Washington (aka "The Pickle King"), and Gnecco had spent the last decade working with cancer survivors, emphasizing healthy diets and extolling the benefits of hemp seed food products.

Both images courtesy of Hemp Northwest



Tonia Farman, *opposite top*, checks hemp plants in a Washington field, where she buys hemp seed from the Colville Tribe. Jackie Richter, *opposite middle*, is the conservation director for Colville Confederated Tribes, the only licensed hemp grower in Washington. *Above*, Hemp Northwest's cold press, and the company's Queen of Hearts hemp seed coffee.

Anticipating a change in the law and seeing a market for the product in the Northwest, Farman launched her own product line: hemp seed oil, hemp hearts, hemp protein and a hemp coffee blend. Making hemp-based products is similar to creating oils, powders and proteins from other seeds like sunflowers. The challenge was connecting the dots between farmers growing for seed and a viable market.

"Before the law changed, all our hemp was imported from Canada and some from China," Farman says. "Everyone in Oregon is growing for marijuana flower. It's the gold rush in that market. Not many people want to grow for seed. It's not necessarily difficult, but you need a combine and a lot of acres. We had a really hard time finding farmers. So we went to the Midwest where they can only grow hemp seed for food products (it's not legal to grow for marijuana flower). We have great relationships with farmers in Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, and a few in Washington and Oregon."

This isn't hemp's first rodeo. The plant was pre-adapted to grow in mature piles around early human settlements, and hemp clothing remnants trace back 6,000 years. The seeds arrived for European cultivation between 1000 and 2000 BCE. From the mid-1800s into the early 20th century, hemp thrived in the U.S., mostly grown in Kentucky in many of the same fields that later supplied the tobacco industry. Everything was great until the 1938 Marijuana Tax Act prohibited hemp production in the U.S. (a contemporary bill similarly ended Canadian production). Although hemp can now legally be grown in all 50 states, it's still complicated. Just a quick look around the Gorge reveals the different uses of the plant.

Hemp Northwest uses hemp grown like wheat, in big fields, harvested with a combine, the seeds separated and gathered to be processed into edible products rich in Omega-3 proteins and healthy fats. Hemp seeds contain all essential amino acids and more protein than flax or chia seeds.

Hemp grown for seed is strictly regulated to maintain its distinction from the marijuana plant. Industrial hemp must contain less than 0.3 percent THC, the chemical compound that produces the psychoactive "high" associated with marijuana. Other upstart hemp businesses, such as Wholesale Organic CBD Oil, based in the former Grass Valley elementary school in Sherman County, press the hemp plant into CBD oil, a product increasingly popular as a tincture and ointment for pain relief.



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WELLNESS



Courtesy of Boring Hemp Co.

Barry Cook, *left*, owner of Boring Hemp Company, shows Senator Jeff Merkley mature hemp plants at his farm. Cook's son, Sam, grows hemp in Parkdale, where he cultivates a hemp seed adapted to generate high yields of CBD oil.

Hemp is not marijuana, the plant grown for its THC properties to be sold as a medical or recreational drug. Marijuana is not federally legal, though it has been legal in Oregon since 2014 and numerous farmers grow it commercially in the Gorge. As opposed to hemp's cultivation in giant wheat-like fields, marijuana is generally grown on smaller plots, with plants spaced as widely as on a Christmas tree farm. The marijuana farming and processing business in Oregon got real big real fast, creating a glut of product and a business challenge for many start-ups hoping to tap into the gold rush.

Parkdale resident Sam Cook is carving out another niche altogether. Cook, who holds a masters in ecological restoration, grew up on a family farm in Boring that raised berries, Christmas trees and nursery plants.

"My dad (Barry Cook) is a bit of a cowboy entrepreneur, and my brother was growing medical marijuana in California for 10 years," Sam tells me as we walk among dry, snow-covered stalks on his two-acre hemp field this winter. "When it became legal to grow hemp in Oregon in 2015, we went for it. But not for marijuana. We got the state's 13th permit to grow hemp for seed and for CBD oil."

Now there are almost 600 hemp growers in Oregon. There's a 5,000-acre operation in Hermiston and some sizeable plots in the Tygh Valley. Cook, on his small plot in Parkdale and on the larger family farm in Boring, develops a feminized seed for hemp adapted to generate high yields of CBD oil. He also travels across the country consulting with upstart hemp farmers, as far as Tennessee and New York.

"It's still not completely straightforward," he says. "Certain states — Washington, Montana, North Dakota — still have strict regulations about where their hemp seed can come from. But otherwise, we ship seeds all over the country now."

The final frontier for modern hemp's use in industrial products, as prophesized in the 1938 *Popular Mechanics* article, remains elusive. Fiber in the stalks has myriad uses, but for now the infrastructure to manage it doesn't exist.

"Right now the vast majority of our stalks and stems don't get used for industrial purposes," says Cook, as he peels apart a dried hemp stem to reveal long fibers and a soft white inner core. "Processing for industrial uses is hard to find in Oregon."

Federal legalization was just an initial step. Farman continues to wrestle with the challenges of a (re-)emerging industry. For confusing legislative reasons, there's only one licensed hemp grower in Washington state, the Colville Tribe. Farman has partnered with them to buy hemp seed from their 120-acre farm. Despite the flourish of news around the plant and the hemp industry, it's still a new frontier in a lot of ways.

David Hanson



“The Colville Tribe bought a new combine,” Farman says. “We went up there for the first planting, in the middle of the season, and at harvest. They didn’t really know what they were doing and neither did we, so it was really collaborative. The knowledge about growing hemp has been lost over the last two generations. All the farmers are learning it again.”

For more detailed information, go to hemp-northwest.com.

David Hanson is a writer, photographer and video producer based in Hood River. Find his editorial and commercial work at ModocStories.com and weddings at CascadiaStudios.com.

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