

Colorado poised to see acreage devoted to hemp double

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Acreage used to grow hemp in Colorado could double this year, as the state-regulated agricultural enterprise continues to grow.

“We’re getting 10-15 registrants per day,” said Duane Sinning, program manager for the Colorado Department of Agriculture. “And there are already 60 applications in progress.”

What the state does know: More than 4,700 acres of outdoor production and 800,000 square feet of indoor space are included in the 347 active registrations. That’s a boost already from 3,600 acres and 571,000 square feet last year.

The new applications could add thousands of acres devoted to hemp, a crop that became legal in Colorado for the first time in decades when voters passed Amendment 64 in 2012. There are large [outdoor](#) growing operations planned in Pueblo, Otero and Baca counties.

In 2014, the major areas where hemp was grown were in Larimer and Boulder counties, near the state’s largest universities. Now, it’s moved into traditional farming areas in the South Platte, Arkansas and Rio Grande valleys.

Most so far has been grown from clones until seed stock becomes available. Sinning said it has been hard to certify seed from other countries, where most hemp is still grown.

The state adopted rules that require hemp plants to have less than 0.3 percent THC, the psychoactive chemical in cannabis, to differentiate it from its more potent cousin, marijuana. More than 90 percent of the hemp grown last year passed the state test.

That distinction has caused some friction for the hemp industry at both ends of the spectrum.

“The marijuana industry pushes back to drive out the hemp,” Sinning said. “Since hemp is a state mandate, counties can’t opt out like they can for marijuana.”

[The](#) problem with outdoor grows is that cross-pollination would ruin both crops by elevating the THC levels of hemp, making it illegal, and lowering the THC levels in marijuana, making it less commercially viable. Generally, fields of hemp and marijuana should be more than 2 miles apart.

The other problem comes from those who do not understand that hemp is not marijuana.

“It’s so new that some people do not understand the difference,” Sinning said. “Growing hemp is no different than corn as a statewide concern.”

Those attitudes are changing. For instance, the Pueblo Economic Development Corp. has endorsed hemp growing as one of its focus points for attracting new industry.

Much of the hemp grown so far is used for making CBD oil, which can be infused into products ranging from cosmetics to health aids.

Fiber from industrial hemp could be more useful if there were processing plants. Some efforts have begun to build decortication plants — literally beating the plants to a pulp — in order to process the fiber for shipment elsewhere.

“There is some scale-up in the size of production being looked at,” Sinning said. “The fibers are tough, so it tears up equipment. But that’s also why they’re valued for making things like T-shirts that last a long time.”

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