

Industrial hemp crop trial gives new hope for Australian industry

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Topic: Crop Harvesting

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Hemp producers are excited about a new winter variety. (*ABC Rural: Emily Middleton*)

In short:

Industrial hemp can be used to make food, clothing and construction materials, but current crops across Australia only cover about 1,000 hectares.

A new trial showing the crop can be grown in colder, drier areas has farmers excited about its potential.

What's next?

NSW MP Jeremy Buckingham says there is a "huge opportunity" for Australian farmers to crack the hemp market in China.

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Industrial hemp is one of the most diverse agricultural products on the market, with uses in food, clothing and construction materials.

Its potential has been the focus of a NSW government-initiated hemp industry roundtable, a hemp industry task force, and a hemp industry development plan.

But according to the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD), there is only a little more than 1,000 hectares of industrial hemp in crop production across Australia.



Industrial hemp crop trials are underway to determine varying growing conditions. (*ABC Rural: Emily Middleton*)

Member of the Legalise Cannabis Party, Jeremy Buckingham, said reducing regulation would open up overseas opportunities.

The crop can only be grown under licence in NSW.

"There's a lot of demand for hemp coming from China, as the Chinese move to grow more food and grow less fibre," he said.

"So there's a huge opportunity for Australian farmers and NSW farmers to get into that industry."



Jeremy Buckingham says there are export opportunities for hemp production. *(ABC News: Helena Burke)*

Mr Buckingham said industrial hemp, which must have a low THC content and no measurable psychoactive effect, was mainly used in Australia to diversify crop rotations and produce hemp seed.

But he said there was a big push for use in fibre and construction materials.

"The fibre part of the plant goes usually to textiles ... the other part of the plant can be used as an addendum to concrete and create hemp houses," he said.

"It's incredibly fire resistant, [has] great insulation properties, mould resistant, and you're growing a crop that then locks away carbon for multi-generations."



An industrial hemp trial in Grenfell grew beyond the two-metre mark in three months. *(ABC Rural: Emily Middleton)*

Hemp trials

Australian government-funded research and development organisation Agrifutures has run trials of hemp across each state for the past eight years to work out the best growing conditions.

NSW agronomist John Muir said successful trials of a winter variety could be a "game changer" for the industry.



John Muir says there is potential for expanded hemp production in NSW. *(ABC Rural: Lara Webster)*

"It's a soil improver, it's another rotational crop and not only can we grow it in summer, we're finding that it can grow and is frost-tolerant and cold-tolerant in winter," he said.

"So here we are, instead of having irrigation in southern Australia, we can grow it now on 20 million hectares of dry land winter farming."

Mr Muir said before the trials, the industry believed industrial hemp was grown only as a warm-season crop, meaning it was limited to certain climates and parts of the year.



Dry land industrial hemp has been proven to grow well even in drought-like conditions. *(ABC Rural: Emily Middleton)*

But preliminary results from a winter dry land crop trial in Grenfell showed the options for farmers could be significantly expanded.

He said hemp was fast growing and had the ability to improve soils without any additional input.

"It'll grow six meters tall in six months," Mr Muir said.

"That's a huge, massive biomass crop, whether it's for fuel, for biomass, for concrete replacement, hempcrete, whatever you want to use it for."



Hemp trials have found the plant can grow in different environments. (*ABC Rural: Emily Middleton*)

'Really exciting' potential

Farmer Bruce Simpson has been hosting the trial on his Grenfell property, where he said the hemp had grown about 7.5 centimetres a day without any kind of irrigation and limited rainfall in the three months since planting.

"It's already at two metres plus, heading to three," he said.

Mr Simpson said the trial highlighted the potential for hemp to be used as an equivalent rotation crop, as canola was to wheat.



Bruce Simpson inspects his industrial hemp crop. *(ABC Rural: Emily Middleton)*

He said the crop had increased the level of humus in his soil, which was an organic matter crucial for fertility.

"Science is saying high organic matter will hold 40 per cent more moisture, so that's equivalent to another four inches (101 millimetres) of rain in your growing season that doesn't disappear," Mr Simpson said.

"So the benefits there [are] of an alternative crop in rotation, plus a higher profit margin, and I'm sure that's going to happen, and is suitable for dry land farming.

"It's really exciting as to the potential of the crop."



Bruce Simpson says ladybugs on the industrial hemp are a good sign. *(ABC Rural: Emily Middleton)*

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