

History

The first records of hemp cultivation and use are from China, where the species most likely originated (Ehrensing). Migrating peoples likely brought hemp to Europe where, by the 16th century, it was widely distributed, cultivated for fiber, and the seed cooked with barley or other grains and eaten (Dempsey, 1975).

Hemp reportedly was first grown in the New World in Chile in 1545 (Blade). The Puritans brought hemp to New England in 1645 as a fiber source for household spinning and weaving, but it never rivaled flax in importance. Cultivation spread to Virginia and, in 1775, to Kentucky, where the crop grew so well a commercial cordage industry developed. The hemp industry flourished in Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois between 1840 and 1860 because of strong demand for sailcloth and cordage by the U.S. Navy. However, increased production of cotton in the South, due to the development of the cotton gin, and imports of cheaper jute and abaca eventually displaced most domestic hemp production (Dempsey, Ehrensing).

In 1937, Congress passed the Marijuana Tax Act, which placed all *Cannabis* culture under the regulatory control of the U.S. Treasury Department. The Act required the registration and licensing of all hemp growers with the Federal Government in an effort to restrict production of marijuana in the United States (Dempsey; Rawson, 1992; Ehrensing).

During World War II, when imports of abaca and jute were unavailable, the Government instituted an emergency program to produce hemp as a domestic substitute. USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation contracted with War Hemp Industries, Inc., a quasi-official organization, to produce planting seed and fiber. Production peaked in 1943 and 1944. After the war, production rapidly declined as imports resumed and legal restrictions were reimposed. A small hemp fiber industry continued in Wisconsin until 1958 (Dempsey, Ehrensing).

Industrial Hemp in Canada

In 1998, Health Canada permitted 259 farmers to grow hemp on 6,180 acres, mostly in Ontario and Manitoba (Health Canada, June 1998; Health Canada, June 1999). As of June 1999, Health Canada had issued 674 hemp production licenses, allowing cultivation on 35,000 acres. Manitoba accounted for over half of the acreage, followed by Saskatchewan and Ontario (Hansen-Trip, 1999). Actual acreage under cultivation was lower because of a wet spring in western Canada, lack of certified seed, and license delays (Hanks, Fall 1999). Most of the production was for seed, especially in western Canada.

Gardner and White (1998) and Hanks (Fall 1999) profile the leading Canadian companies involved in hemp production and processing. Most process seed or oil using existing facilities. Two Manitoba companies, Hemp Oil Canada and Fresh Hemp Foods, have their own presses. Only two companies, Ontario-based Hempline, Inc. and Kenex Ltd., operate fiber processing facilities.