

HEMP IS HIGH FASHION

U.S. News & World Report

January 20, 1997

By Dan McGraw

You can't get high smoking jeans made from it. The oil tastes pretty good on salads, but don't expect to get a buzz. You can make brownies with it, but after eating a few, reggae music still sounds about the same.

No, this hemp is different. It's called industrial hemp, and though it looks a lot like its leafy cousin, *Cannabis sativa*, or marijuana, it lacks the same hallucinatory properties. Just as corn comes in different varieties—sweet, short ear, or animal feed—so too does Hemp, which grows with various amounts of THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol), the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis. Industrial hemp is a tall, lanky, low-THC variety of marijuana, prized more for its fibrous stalk and its oil-rich seeds than its smokability.

Hemp chic. Cultivating industrial hemp in the United States has been illegal for more than a quarter century because of fears that pot growers would raise their crops alongside hemp, making the illegal weed harder to spot. Imports of finished hemp products, however, are still allowed—and demand is soaring. Fashion designers like Calvin Klein and Giorgio Armani are adding hemp clothing and bed linens to their lines. Adidas sold 30,000 pairs of athletic shoes made partly from hemp last year. Hemp retail stores are sprouting up all across the country, hawking everything from hemp shampoos and soaps to jeans and salad oil. Some estimates put worldwide trade in hemp products at \$100 million last year, a figure that experts say could double or even triple in the next few years.

All in all, it is quite a comeback for this fibrous plant with a history. Hemp had been an agricultural staple in America for hundreds of

years, providing rope for sailing ships, canvas for covered wagons and lamp oil for colonial farms. But it became a victim of technological advances in the 19th century: The cotton gin made cotton fabric cheaper; the slave labor needed to process hemp disappeared, and fossil fuels replaced hemp oil for light and heat. The coup de grace came this century, when hemp all but disappeared from world markets as most industrialized countries sought to stamp out drug abuse.

It's easy to understand the renewed interest in hemp today. The plant is one of nature's finest renewable fiber sources, producing four times as much pulp per acre as trees. As demand for fiberboard, packing materials and paper products increases, hemp may be an alternative to buying up expensive forest land and clear-cutting trees for wood pulp. Curtis Koster, Internationasl Paper Co's technology business manager, notes that as a source of fiber, hemp is the strongest and easiest to grow, with the broadest geographical range.

It also is environmentally correct. As hemp activists point out, it can be grown without the pesticides and irrigation needed to raise a cotton crop. For that reason, hemp clothing has become a status symbol for the ecofriendly, even though some of the material feels like burlap and calls to mind peasant wear on a Communist Chinese collective. Hemp clothing is no bargain either: A shirt might set you back \$60 , a pair of jeans \$80.

The high cost stems from a shortage of hemp fabric on the world market. About a dozen countries, including China, Russia and several Eastern European nations, grow hemp legally. But hemp clothing makers often have to go to great lengths to line up suppliers. Chris Boucher, president of Hempstead Co., a California import and manufacturing firm that sold \$1.5 million worth of hemp products last year, says he must deposit money in the Bank of China, which holds the cash for 60 days before he receives a delivery. "The textile business people laugh at us because no one in his right mind would pay upfront and in cash for jeans material," he says.

Few doubt that legalizing hemp cultivation in the United States makes good commercial sense. But the politics are tricky. This year, as many as 10 states may introduce bills to legalize growing hemp

with less than 3 percent THC content. But few expect any to pass. Besides, with marijuana use increasing among teenagers, states that passed a legal-hemp initiative would likely face the wrath of federal authorities. (The Clinton administration says it will prosecute Arizona and California doctors who prescribe marijuana for medicinal purposes, even though voters in those states approved initiatives making it legal for them to do so.)

But hemp activists may have a trump card. Leaders of the Navajo Nation are considering cultivation as many as 40,000 acres of hemp this spring as part of an economic-development project that will employ 70 people in a particleboard mill near the aptly named Arizona city of Sawmill.

Open door? Although growing plants containing THC is illegal under current Navajo law, the tribal council might amend the law to make cultivating plants with less than 3 percent THC legal. The Navajos also are considering using hemp fiber to make rugs and pressing hemp seeds for oil. Proponents believe that the tribe's sovereign status could make it immune from current U.S. drug laws. "We are only interested in the commercial and industrial applications," says Jim Robinson, director of the Navajo Hemp Project.

If the hemp project is allowed to go ahead, federal Drug Enforcement Administration officials worry, hemp activist farmers in Kentucky, Iowa and Colorado will quickly increase their demands to grow hemp, too. That could open the door for marijuana cultivation throughout the country, the DEA fears. Officially, however, the agency is adopting a wait-and-see attitude. But clearly it would prefer that the Navajos just say no.