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Pierre Heistein: Time to separate hemp from marijuana

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 **Pierre Heistein**

If you smoke hemp to get high you will be disappointed. Yet if you plant hectares of the species and turn it into one of 25 000 possible consumer products, your disappointment will recede in the wake of a potentially thriving business.

The government does not see it this way. Hemp - along with marijuana (locally referred to as dagga) - is a variety of the *Cannabis sativa* plant species, which according to South African regulation automatically classifies it as an illegal agricultural product. However, hemp and marijuana are like Lisa and Bart Simpson - while part of the same family they are markedly different; one is carefree and prone to misbehaviour while the other is immensely productive.



Cannabis plants. File picture: David McNew. Credit: REUTERS

Hemp contains very low levels of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (delta-9-THC) - the psychoactive chemical of marijuana that makes users high. Canada classifies hemp as containing a delta-9-THC content of less than 0.3 percent. In contrast, marijuana has a delta-9-THC content between 5 percent and 30 percent.

Hemp is productively valuable due to its high fibre content and efficient land use. It takes only four months from planting to harvest and between 250 and 400 individual plants can be grown per square metre. In suitable growing areas with fertile soil and long days - such as the Western Cape and Eastern Cape - hemp requires almost no pesticides, herbicides or fungicides. It is effective at pulling harmful chemicals from the soil and due to its deep root system and high density, it stabilises erosion and chokes weeds making it a suitable species for crop rotation.

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Unlock an industry

Yet treated as a dangerous weed, the commercial potential of hemp is being choked by government regulation. The only way to grow hemp in South Africa is through a permit for “Research on a Narcotic Drug” issued by the Department of Health (DoH).

Other departments that spew speeches about job creation, economic growth, beneficiation, value chains and empowerment should be banging on the doors of the DoH to have them unlock an industry that has investors biting at the bit.

The US market for hemp-based products is worth \$580 million (R8 billion) per year. It is legal to grow, process and market hemp in 36 countries worldwide. France and China account for 95 percent of global production, primarily for use in cigarette papers and textiles.

Hemp fibre adds strength, durability, absorbency and breathability when mixed with cotton, wool or synthetic fibres. It has high heat conductivity, keeping the fabric cool and making it perfect for sporting gear. Hemp has been mixed with silk to produce lingerie and underwear.

In clothing, cars and other goods, consumers are often unaware of the hemp content of their purchases. Most major automotive manufacturers use a mix of hemp fibre, fibreglass, kenaf and flax to make composite door panels - the Mercedes C-Class contains about 20kg of hemp.

Hemp fibre is replacing glass fibre in the production of reinforced plastics, reducing their health and environmental impact. Hemp plastics can be implemented in standard injection moulding machines and are adopted mostly by the automotive, packaging and building industries.

Hempcrete is a building material made from hemp and lime that can be used to replace concrete. While hempcrete's lower density means that supporting structures are needed to carry the vertical load, walls built from hempcrete offer greater insulation and flexibility to movement. As it is not as brittle as concrete, no expansion joints are needed in construction. Other hemp-based building materials include insulation, fibreboard and pressboard and it is also used in paints, rope, lubricants and cleaning products.

Hemp seeds contain more omega-3 than walnuts and are 25 percent protein, making them popular in dietary supplements.

The cosmetics industry has not turned a blind eye either, turning to the high oil content of hemp seeds for creams and lotions. While politicians profess possibilities, some paths to growth in South Africa are fairly simple; in this case it is just a change in definition. It is time for the government to separate the legality of hemp from the illegality of marijuana and investors and entrepreneurs will do the rest to build a budding industry.

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