

Newly legal crop attracts new generation of farmers

By Carol Ryan Dumas
Capital Press

ONTARIO — Artist, sound engineer and adventure traveler Blu Fortner is adding “farmer” to his resume with his first commercial crop of hemp seed.

The Idaho native moved across the state line to Oregon five years ago in his pursuit of growing medicinal hemp.

His attraction was the plant’s potential to provide relief to people suffering from various ailments.

“I moved to Oregon because the laws here were more cannabis-friendly,” he said.

He started with a small, organic, medicinal grow but soon found there wasn’t a market for his production.

With his limited agricultural experience, he was fortunate to meet Clint Shock, a plant physiologist and agronomist. Shock, who was the director of Oregon State University’s Malheur Experiment Station, was interested in medicinal plants.

“I wanted to learn about non-cannabis medicinal plants, and he wanted to learn about hemp,” Fortner said.

It made for a good partnership, he said.

The two teamed up in a teacher-student relationship and did a four-plant hemp test in Shock’s backyard last year. Three of the plants were successful females that produced high-level CBD oil.

CBD is a non-psychoactive compound in hemp thought by many to offer numerous health benefits.

This year, Fortner and Shock planted hemp in two fields and a total of 5 acres to produce feminized hemp seed for growers. They also partnered in a new business — Medicinal Botanical Seed.

If the crop is successful, they plan to expand production next year.

At 38, Fortner is one of a growing number of “brand new farmers” drawn to agriculture by the allure of hemp, a newly legal crop that produces CBD and a variety of other products ranging from the edible seeds to clothing material. Hemp production was legalized in the 2018 Farm Bill.

Both THC — the main psychoactive compound in marijuana, which is also thought to have health benefits — and CBD found in hemp have a lot of value, he said.

“But THC is limited by state and federal regulations, and CBD is legal nationally and internationally,” he said.

He thinks younger people’s attraction to hemp farming is connected to their belief that it should be legal. But it also provides a niche for farmers who don’t have a lot of resources when it comes to land, equipment



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Blu Fortner, left, and Clint Shock of Medicinal Botanical Seed in Ontario on June 5 displaying hemp stem cuttings that have established roots and are ready for transplanting for seed production.

and capital.

“For farming in general, there isn’t easy access. There are almost insurmountable hurdles for young farmers,” he said.

But with demand for hemp currently higher than the supply, a small-scale farmer can grow 1 acre and make a living, he said.

Legal boom

Michael Bowman — widely known as “Mr. Hemp” — has been a driving force in the legalization of hemp production in the U.S.

He’s farmed his entire life on the eastern plains of Colorado above the declining Ogallala Aquifer. Twenty years ago, he was researching crops that would use less water than corn and alfalfa.

“The hemp plant captured my attention and imagination,” he said, listing the plant’s other environmental benefits.

That started him on a path of advocacy, and he became the founding board chairman of the National Hemp Association.

The association had a state-by-state strategy to get hemp legalized and build support for federal legalization. It resulted in progress in the 2014 Farm Bill and victory in the 2018 Farm Bill.

The 2014 Farm Bill legalized hemp research in states where its production was allowed, and the 2018 Farm Bill took hemp off the controlled substance list and redefined it as an agricultural crop.

According to Vote Hemp, a nonprofit advocacy group, 46 states have now legalized hemp.

The 2018 Farm Bill also lifted restrictions on interstate commerce and lending by financial institutions and authorized crop insurance.

But the new rules guiding those issues won’t be in place



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Clint Shock, left, and Blu Fortner stand in their hemp seed production field in Malheur County in late September.

until 2020, making 2019 the industry’s “teenage years,” Bowman said.

“It’s been a little awkward, but there’s been significant growth under that awkwardness, he said.

Since the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill, hemp cultivation in the U.S. has grown rapidly, according to Vote Hemp. The organization estimates 230,000 acres of hemp were planted in 2019 compared with 78,176 acres in 2018.

Moving the needle

The U.S. hemp industry is driven by CBD oil, both because of the potential profits and the current lack of infrastructure to produce other hemp products, Bowman said.

Economic models show a net return for growing hemp for CBD oil from \$20,000 all the way up to \$80,000 an acre for someone “who really knows what he’s doing,” he said.

“It gets a lot of farmers’ attention,” he said.

But contrary to what most people believe, it’s not an easy crop to grow for high production, he said.

“There’s certainly a community of first-timers that didn’t make any money,” he

said.

There’s huge demand for hemp and CBD products, and the new legislation that legalized hemp farming has really opened up the market, Jessica Manly, communications director for National Young Farmers Coalition, said.

“I do think it’s something that’s attracting younger farmers,” she said.

From what she’s hearing, a lot of beginning farmers are becoming interested in growing hemp and some young farmers are experimenting with it on some of their land.

In addition, a lot of commodity farmers are transitioning their operations to hemp because prices are much higher than the crops they’ve been growing, she said. Many commodity crop prices have remained low in recent years.

There are some concerns, however, about regulation, permitting and interstate trade, she said.

“That’s still getting sorted out because it’s such a new industry,” she said.

There is also concern about whether this is a bubble that’s going to burst — whether demand will hold up over time or whether the

market will be over-supplied, she said.

On the flip side, vegetable growers are worried about competition for land. Hemp growers might be able to pay more for land and crowd them out, which also raises a food security issue, she said.

“It’s definitely a concern,” she said.

Youthful appeal

The legalization of hemp farming has created a “hemp Wild West” that’s bringing new farmers and younger farmers into the industry, Bonny Jo Peterson, executive director of the Industrial Hemp Association of Washington, said.

She’s talked to several conventional farmers who say hemp is getting their children and grandchildren interested in farming.

Some who were looking to sell their operation because they had no interested successor now find they do have a succession plan, she said.

“Hemp is more exciting than corn or hay. A lot of millennials are jumping in full bore,” she said.

It’s something they find interesting. They see the potential hemp brings to the table when it comes to climate and the environment. On the

CBD side, the attraction is its potential as an alternative medicine, she said.

The interest in hemp extends beyond the farming end of things. It’s also in processing, consulting, soils, pesticides and machinery, she said.

“Just about every aspect of agriculture is being tapped into for this new experience,” she said.

Peterson helped write the bill that fully authorized hemp production in Washington. Gov. Jay Inslee signed it into law last April.

The legislation spurred growth in the state’s industry from one grower with about 140 acres to more than 100 licensed businesses and about 7,000 licensed acres, she said.

The majority of those businesses are growers, and at least one-third are new farmers, she said.

Rural resurgence

Hemp is attractive for a lot of reasons, including its role in the country’s history and U.S. agriculture, Bowman, the Colorado advocate, said.

Hemp is used in more than 25,000 products, giving anyone with an imagination and an entrepreneurial spirit a “lane to swim in,” he said.

Growing crops like corn, soybeans, cotton and rice is robotic, he said.

“There’s nothing to tickle the right side of the brain, everything is prescribed,” Bowman said.

Millennials and Generations X, Y and Z have little interest in systems like that, he said.

“The point of it is ... the plant has come out of prohibition, and they want to show you what can be done,” Bowman said.

Hemp is absolutely bringing young people into agriculture, he said. Colorado, for example, is seeing a tremendous number of young people entering the field, Bowman said.

That includes people who don’t have an agricultural background and an influx of young people coming back to the farm and rural communities, he said.

“I’m really excited about that. We are seeing a resurgence, and it’s all due to the plant,” Bowman said.

But it’s going to take leadership to keep that momentum going. People who see the opportunity, embrace it and develop policy to support it are going to do well and “create an ecosystem of bringing kids back” to agriculture, he said.

At 60, he’s about the average age of U.S. farmers today. The industry needs a younger generation to take up the reins, he said.

“This is our one chance, generational chance, to reset the clock,” Bowman said.

Woman sues clinic over claims of past abuse

PORTLAND — A woman who says she was repeatedly sexually abused by her pediatrician has filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the doctor’s former medical clinic in Oregon.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported Tuesday that the woman says the abuse occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s at the Bay Clinic in Coos Bay.

The lawsuit claims Dr. Terrell Clarke abused the woman dozens of times during appointments when she was a child. She is now in her early 40s.

Neither Clarke nor the Bay Clinic responded to requests for comment.

Oregon Medical Board records say Clarke started practice in Oregon

in 1974 and his license lapsed or expired in 2014.

An attorney representing the woman says no police reports were filed and the statute of limitations has passed for pursuing criminal charges.

Police: Body found is missing university student

PORTLAND — Portland police say a body found near the St. Johns Bridge in Northwest Portland is a missing University of Portland freshman.

Police on Tuesday evening said that the medical examiner’s office had conducted an autopsy and positively identified the body as Owen Klinger’s.

Klinger was 18, and was a freshman at University of Portland.

Police did not release Klinger’s

OREGON IN BRIEF

From wire reports

cause of death, and asked anyone with information about the case to call police at 503-823-0406.

Dustin and Mary Klinger issued a statement saying Portland police had notified them about the body.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported the 18-year-old went missing Oct. 6, after he was seen leaving his dorm at University of Portland.

Scuba divers find truck, remains in Columbia River

UMATILLA COUNTY — A truck and skeletal remains found in the Columbia River have been connected to a 26-year-old missing person’s case from Washington state.

KOMO-TV reported a couple who went scuba diving last week in Umatilla County reported they

discovered a submerged Ford Ranger with Washington state license plates.

Umatilla County sheriff’s dispatchers confirmed the truck was connected to a missing person’s case out of Prosser, Wash., from 26 years ago.

The missing person was Maynard Koen, born in 1911 and reported missing in August 1993.

It took about two hours for crews to get the truck out of the water. The Sheriff’s Office says they found skeletal remains and a driver’s license issued to Koen.

Authorities: 2 teens arrested in hazing

COTTAGE GROVE — Authorities say two boys were arrested and cited after a member of the Cottage Grove High School

junior varsity football team was assaulted in the boy’s locker room as part of a hazing incident last month.

Cottage Grove Police Chief Scott Shepherd said a school resource officer was alerted the morning of Sept. 30 by staff at Cottage Grove High School to the report from one student of hazing and bullying incidents associated with the football team.

The male student was interviewed at the school and details of the incidents were obtained.

Two students, both 15 years old, were arrested and each issued citations. The two boys have been cited with physical harassment, according to Shepherd.

Because all of the involved are juveniles, the suspects’ names were not released.