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OUR VIEW

Federal law makes hemp a risky crop

We've been following the progress of Washington state's nascent hemp industry. The state recently licensed its first growers, and a crop has been planted.

Hemp and marijuana, both cannabis plants with decidedly different properties and followings, are legally joined at the hip. States that have moved to legitimize pot have also moved to allow commercial hemp production.

We've never been bullish on hemp.

It's not that we don't appreciate its potential. After all, you can go into most any store and see something made out of hemp, hemp oil or hemp seed. Consumers are enthusiastic, and the crop has gotten ample positive press.

And farmers in the Northwest who are planting hemp are finding a ready market.

We have no moral objection to hemp. Hemp is to marijuana what a poppyseed muffin is to heroin. Hemp contains very low amounts of THC, the chemical that produces the high in marijuana. While it is possible to boost the THC in hemp, we've read nothing that suggests this is a real problem.

That it remains illegal under federal law is our only problem with hemp. It's a pretty big problem.

Despite state laws that "legalize" marijuana and hemp, cannabis of all stripes remains illegal under the federal controlled substances act. That means there are problems with depositing the profits from hemp into federally regulated banks. There

are no federal production loans for hemp. Using water from federal projects to grow it could also be problematic.

As long as states regulate hemp, it appears the Department of Justice will turn a blind eye to its cultivation. It's covered under the "Cole memo," the policy adopted by the Obama administration in 2013

to suspend most cannabis enforcement if states that legalize the stuff agree to strict regulatory measures.

But this legal cover is provisional at best. The Cole

memo lacks any force of law, and can be set aside in favor of the statute at any time.

The current administration has not made a definitive pronouncement, but there were indications just last week that a change is possible concerning marijuana.

Given the mercurial nature of all things Trump, we wouldn't put a bet on a crop that is only viable as long as the administration decides not to enforce the law.

There are efforts being pressed by members of the congressional delegations of states that have legalized recreational and medical marijuana to change the law and decriminalize cannabis. We are having trouble embracing legal marijuana. But we don't see any reason why hemp should be classified as a controlled substance.

Until there's a change in federal law, hemp remains a risky bet. The law should be changed.



Courtesy of Richard A. Howard, USDA NRCS

We wouldn't bet on a crop that is only viable as long as the administration decided not to enforce the law.

OTHER VIEWS

Internet access crucial for rural areas

The Lincoln (Neb.) Journal Star

More than 80 years ago, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued an executive order called the Rural Electrification and Telephone Service Act of 1936. It provided federal loans to bring utilities to expensive-to-serve and hard-to-reach rural areas.

One of the act's chief proponents was a senator from Nebraska named George Norris, who recognized the importance of electricity and phone service to the economic and social well-being of rural communities. Without service, rural America couldn't compete in a changing world.

Well, the ensuing eight decades have brought more changes. Broadband internet and cell service are today's equivalent to electricity and phone. The hurdles to bringing faster internet to rural America are almost identical to the ones in the 1930 — expense and logistics. The solutions will require equal creativity and, most likely, a little federal oomph. And rural residents stand to benefit if this gets figured out sooner rather than later.

President Trump's recent pledge to ford the digital divide as part of an infrastructure plan is heartening, but it's certainly not a straight line from a president's lips to a county farmer's laptop. Ultimately it will require action on lots of governmental levels and

partnerships with providers.

The need, however, is unquestionable. And it's a need that should be felt by all Americans, not just those who want to stream a two hour movie in something close to two hours. All Americans have a vested interest in a thriving rural lifestyle. Some want a

place to go home to. Some want a place of peace. Some simply want affordable food, made possible by farmers and ranchers having access to better technology.

And all will benefit by creating more places in the state where innovation and new business ideas can take root.

The Journal Star's Nick Bergin talked with rural residents who need access to faster internet for work. And

what parent hasn't wanted to simply download a movie and plop the kids in front of it for a couple hour break. Slow internet seeps into so many aspects of life that many of us take our relatively reliable and speedier service for granted. Solutions in rural areas, Bergin found, are expensive or nonexistent.

Right now it may not seem that access to faster internet is a matter of life and death like electricity is. But electricity may have seemed more luxury than necessity in the 1930s. If we want a thriving rural lifestyle in America, we need to take steps now, creative ones, to fix this digital divide.



OTHER VIEWS

When GOP saw the troubled future of Obamacare repeal

Why are Republicans on Capitol Hill having so much trouble repealing and replacing Obamacare? There are reasons all over the place: subsidies, tax credits, tax cuts, Medicaid, essential health benefits, and many others. But there is one fundamental obstacle to getting rid of Obamacare, and it is very simple: Once the government starts giving away, it can't take back.

Go back to October 2013, when Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz was leading an effort to defund Obamacare. It was an impossible goal; the GOP was in the minority in the Senate and a Democrat was in the White House. Under those circumstances, defunding President Obama's signature achievement simply wasn't going to happen. Establishment Republicans were angry at Cruz for raising the hopes of the party's base before certain disappointment.

But there was one sense in which Cruz was right — and the words he spoke four years ago are resonating today in the GOP's struggle to repeal, or, more accurately, rewrite Obamacare.

Cruz based the defund effort on his contention that once Obamacare was fully in place and subsidies began to flow — that was scheduled to begin on January 1, 2014 — there would be no stopping it.

"The Obama strategy, I believe, is that on January 1, subsidies kick in," Cruz told a meeting of the Kingwood, Texas tea party in August 2013. "And his strategy is very simple: He knows that in modern times no major entitlement has ever gone into effect and been unwound. Never been done. His strategy is to get as many Americans as possible hooked on the subsidies, addicted to the sugar."

"I think if we're going to stop Obamacare, we have to do it now," Cruz continued. "If we get to January 1, this thing is here forever."

Of course Republicans did not defund Obamacare — there was never any chance they could — and the subsidies began. And now, exactly as Cruz (and others) predicted, the entitlement program is proving extremely difficult to repeal.

That is because, as Obama and the Democrats who passed it knew, Republicans trying to repeal Obamacare would be taking back something the government had already given to millions of Americans. Once the giving started, Cruz knew, there's no taking back.

And that's where Republicans are now.



BYRON YORK
Comment

They've come up with a different way to provide subsidies, but regardless of name, they are trying to reduce those subsidies and make them available to fewer people. They are trying to cut back on the subsidized benefits insurance companies are required to provide to customers. They are trying to reduce the predicted number of people on Medicaid. They are trying to take back, not give. And it is proving very, very hard.

Other Republicans said similar things during the defunding battle back in 2013. Sen. Mike Lee said, "Before this law kicks in in full force on January 1, 2014, we have one last shot." Sen. Marco Rubio said, "This is our last chance and our last best chance to do something about this." Sen. David Vitter said, "Once (Obamacare) gets into law and starts to put down roots, it's going to be difficult to disrupt."

And now it is. What the 2013 fight showed, and what the current fight is showing again, is that the Republicans' actual last chance to get rid of Obamacare was the 2012 election. That was before the health care law went into effect, before it touched millions of American lives, and when it could still be repealed without great disruption. But when Barack Obama won re-election and

"(Obama's) strategy is to get as many Americans as possible hooked on the subsidies, addicted to the sugar."

— Ted Cruz, Campaigning against Obamacare in 2013

could safeguard (and prop up) Obamacare through its early years, the Republican chance to repeal was gone.

Now Republicans are fighting among themselves over a bill that would make substantial changes in Obamacare but leave the structure of the law intact. And several GOP lawmakers — enough to scuttle any final agreement — are still afraid of cuts in subsidies, in coverage, and in the Medicaid expansion.

Maybe Republicans will succeed. But whatever they do, it won't resemble the root-and-branch repeal they attempted when Obama was president — when they knew he would veto any repeal effort that got to his desk. The Republican effort that passes Congress today will be a much-scaled-back measure that could more accurately be called an Obamacare fix.

It all shows that Cruz was right back in 2013. Once Obamacare's subsidies and benefits began to flow, he reminded us, "this thing is here forever."

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.



LETTERS POLICY

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