



Hemp Application Period Closes; Numbers Rise Dramatically

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MADISON – Nearly 2,100 individuals and businesses have applied to grow or process industrial hemp in 2019, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection reports, with more applications expected in the next week or so.

“This is a dramatic increase from last year,” said Brian Kuhn, director of the department’s Plant Industry Bureau, which houses the hemp program. “We attribute much of the increase to removal of industrial hemp from the controlled substances act as part of the 2018 farm bill late last year. That removed much of the legal uncertainty that may have held participation back somewhat last year.”

Online and emailed applications and renewals by program participants from last year were due by midnight on March 1. However, forms sent through the mail will be accepted as long as they are postmarked by March 1.

To date, 1,405 have applied to grow industrial hemp this year. Of those, 1,244 would be first-time growers. Processor applications are at 692, with 636 first-time applicants. That compares with 247 grower licenses and 100 processors licenses issued for 2018.

“We’re asking applicants to please be patient, and to avoid calling to check on the progress of their applications,” Kuhn said. “While we are in the process of adding staff for the program to meet some of the increased demand, right now we’re working with our existing staff to process all hemp applications. This means that it could take as much as 6-8 weeks to process applications. Unless you have a felony drug conviction in your background check, you will receive your license in time to grow or process this year. If there is some other issue, such as missing information on your application or lack of payment, we will contact you. There is no need to check.”

The industrial hemp program grew out of legislation passed in late 2017 that allowed growing and processing industrial hemp in Wisconsin. The 2014 federal farm bill had authorized states to create pilot research programs that were administered by universities or state agriculture departments. However, industrial hemp remained on the federal list of controlled substances, because it is the same species as marijuana, but industrial hemp is bred to have very low levels of THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. This created a great deal of legal uncertainty. The 2018 farm bill removed that uncertainty.

Industrial hemp was a major crop in Wisconsin in the first half of the 20th Century, mainly harvested for its fiber to make rope. Most growers today are growing either for CBD oil or grain.

Growing or processing hemp in Wisconsin requires a one-time license, and annual registration with the department in years when licensees intend to grow or process. Last year some licensees did not register once they had their licenses. Others opted not to grow even after registering because of bad weather and other factors. Production results for 2018 are not yet available.

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