

# Secret Government Hemp Crop Destroyed

In 1994, an experimental hemp crop was planted in the Imperial Valley which was intended to advance research in the cultivation of industrial hemp. The crop was grown by owners of Southern California's Hempstead Company, Chris Boucher, Dave Martyn and Brian Ambrose, along with Don Wirtshafter of the Ohio Hempery, who cooperated in the venture under the name Hemp Agro Tech.

Seeds that had genetically reduced levels of THC measuring .5 percent, which the growers claim is well below an intoxicating level, were imported from France and Hungary and approved for import by federal agencies, according to Dave Martyn. The growers were under the impression that the crop was legal and never tried to hide their participation, he says. They received permits from the Imperial Valley Agricultural Commission and got a written land lease from the Conservation Research Center, which owned the land.

Because the research center land was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agro Tech farmers assumed its project had federal approval, Martyn says. The project was placed under the administration of the Imperial Valley Research Conservation Committee by the local agricultural board and was kept secret, known only to one assigned narcotics agent, the Imperial Valley Agricultural Commissioner and USDA officials. Permission was also granted by the Internal Revenue Service, to whom Agro Tech had to pay \$1 for a permit to grow the hemp, and the Department of the Treasury, the agencies responsible for writing the 1937 Marijuana Prohibitive Tax Act, according to Martyn.

Six fields of approximately 1,600 hemp seeds of different varieties were planted and grown under a variety of conditions so that comparative analyses of agricultural methods could be made.

The crop grew to be four months old and 10 feet tall, thriving in the scorching Imperial Valley heat. On sunny days, the plants grew an inch a day, and estimates on its yield were between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds of fiber. Potential buyers were found, including Dexter Textiles and International Paper, whose promise to buy a certain number of pounds of hemp insured the economic feasibility of the project, according to Martyn.

On July 21, the cooperative was notified the plants would be destroyed because the state attorney general's office did not approve the crop. All hemp contains THC, and any level of THC, however low the level may be, makes a crop illegal, according to Mike Van Winkel, information officer for the Attorney General's Division of Law Enforcement. On July 25, members of the Imperial County Narcotics Task Force showed up with a bulldozer and destroyed the crop.

According to Dick Kershaw, president of the Imperial Valley Conservation Research Center, his agency assumed the crop was legal based on the official importation papers for the seeds and the approval granted by the Imperial Valley Agricultural Commissioner. "They (Agro Tech) kept hammering on the fact that since the THC level was under certain limits, it was legal," Van Winkel says. "As they presented it to the Agricultural Department people, who are not narcotic agents, not familiar with the laws and not equipped to test the crop, it appeared to be a totally legitimate operation," he says. Kershaw says he does not support growing marijuana but expresses regret that such an important industrial crop as hemp is forbidden. "It could thrive with the Imperial Valley's tropical weather and cheap water," Kershaw says.

Chris Boucher and Dave Martyn recently lobbied for a bill in draft form in the state Legislature that requires an author, called the Industrial Hemp Bill or the True Hemp Amendment. It would regulate growing, handling, processing and transportation of hemp in California for plants with recognized THC levels below 1 percent. "The hemp grown in the United States is not smoked but is a fibrous hemp," Boucher explains. "The tropical strain, with high THC levels, is not used for fiber." SB