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OP-ED by Francesco Mirizzi

Hemp: high time for the EU to weed out prejudice

Just as we can't see the forest for the trees, with hemp production, the plant behind the flower is often forgotten. Hemp is regularly at the top of the political agenda across Members States, as demonstrated by the recent debates on cannabis light shops. Sadly, these controversies outshine the many benefits that THC-free hemp – also known as industrial hemp – could represent for the European bio-based economy. With Brussels now welcoming its new set of MEPs, it is time to dispel misconceptions and propose an ambitious policy to restore the whole hemp sector and a European tradition.

Europe is currently facing a paradox when it comes to industrial hemp production: never has the plant been the subject of so much public debate while at the same time seen its production so limited. As one of the fastest growing plants for fibres, industrial hemp has in fact been a well-known European tradition for centuries. Hemp has provided our forefathers with food, ropes for their boats, paper for their books and textiles for their clothes. Abandoned with the advent of synthetic fibres, hemp is now making a comeback with brand new applications that are likely to change the way we perceive it. Here are three reasons as to why hemp is key to the ecological transition:

Hemp could help Europe to become a bioeconomy champion

If we take into account its traditional, as well as its most recent uses, hemp could become a reliable substitute for many petrol-based materials. While hemp is increasingly used in the construction industry in a variety of forms, it is mainly used for non-structural components, such as concrete, bricks, prefab panels and wall insulation. The traditional use of hemp for paper and especially for fibres is also rekindling the interest of consumers and the textile industry. Levi's recently announced that they have found a way to make hemp feel like cotton, which opens up brand new opportunities for the short-term development of the sector.

Hemp cultivation is relevant for both agronomic and environmental reasons

Hemp is easy to cultivate and requires very little input, be it water or plant protection products. Moreover, it can grow practically anywhere in Europe and is an ideal carbon sink: one hectare of hemp can store multiple tonnes of CO₂, while products made from hemp permanently fix CO₂ and can easily be recycled. Hemp is also a very good rotation crop and has positive effects on the soil and subsequent crops.

Hemp is beneficial for both animal and human health

Hemp products are used as traditional food and are considered to be a super food. Hemp seeds are extremely nutritious and exceptionally rich in two essential fatty acids: linoleic acid (omega-6) and alpha-linolenic acid (omega-3). More recently, it has been proven that Cannabidiol (one of the most abundant cannabinoids naturally present in hemp) has neuroprotective effects. Moreover, cosmetic experts have argued that hemp possesses antioxidant and anti-aging attributes. Last but not least, hemp is used for animal feed and animal bedding given that hemp litter has a particularly high absorbency (3 to 4 times its weight in water).

Against this backdrop, the sector clearly needs to be better understood in order to further develop hemp production. This can be achieved first and foremost through political recognition. This is why clear and consistent EU legislation would reassure operators (and consumers) and provide the entirety of the sector with a sense of direction. Work needs to start from scratch: marketing standards need to be set, clear limits (as regards THC) and definitions need to be provided and – most importantly – a long-term vision should be developed.

As new MEPs will kick off by discussing the future CAP as one of the very first files on their desks, greater attention should be paid to the potential of THC-free hemp in this landmark policy. The CAP should recognise the environmental benefits of hemp: its use in rotation should be encouraged by granting top-up payments for crops providing significant environmental benefits. Equally, strategies at EU and Member States level need to be set up and coupled with financial support. There are already some possibilities on the table: in its CAP proposals, the Commission planned to include hemp in the list of sectors that could benefit from specific development measures under the CAP Strategic Plans (such as investments, risk management, innovation, etc.).

In 2017, THC-free surface area increased in Europe by 62% compared to the previous year, in spite of the widespread legal uncertainty. We still don't have data for 2018 but a further increase is highly likely, as the global market is growing and is expected to represent 130 billion dollars by 2029. If demand for hemp products continues to grow and the EU market finally adopts a harmonised approach, there will be considerable opportunities for farmers: new jobs, likely to attract younger generations, could be created in rural areas and a whole supply chain could be restored to its former glory, with an innovative twist.

THC-free hemp deserves more than smoke and mirrors. It is a clear example of a win-win solution for farmers, consumers and environment alike: MEPs now have the possibility to sweeten up the deal!

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Note to the editors:

- The following op-ed was released on Tuesday 11th June on Mr Mirizzi's LinkedIn account.
- For more information about EU farmers' and agri-cooperatives' priorities for the EU institutions 2019-2024 please head to www.wefarm4.eu.

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