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Community members tour hemp facilities

By MICHAEL MARESH, Staff Writer Sep 29, 2019 Updated Sep 29, 2019



Keithly Williams Seeds Nursery Manager Paul Chambers explains the importance of having quality seeds to grow hemp, while young hemp plants Saturday. PHOTO MICHAEL MARESH

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HOLTVILLE — More than 80 visitors Saturday morning learned a little about hemp research and production through tours of the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources Desert Research and Extension Center and the Keithly Williams Seeds Nursery.

They also visited a farm in Calipatria on the southwest corner of Kalin and Eddins roads that grows hemp.

The tours were the centerpiece of Day 2 of the Imperial County Hemp Summit & Expo.

Oli Bachie, with the UC Cooperative Extension in Holtville, said hemp is not new to Imperial County, but instead it is a crop that is being revisited.

He said there is an emphasis that industrial hemp is a mild climate crop, but those concerns and uncertainties need to be resolved through research and development.

Bachie believes farmers and the ag community will be able to grow hemp by next February.

He told the 80 residents who visited the UC extension office that some of the concerns are cross-pollination effects that can destroy hemp and even marijuana when coming into contact with each other.

“There is a kind of you can’t be my neighbor type,” he said.

Another concern is pest and pest management challenges, so safe and effective pesticides for hemp need to be developed.

A third concern, he said, is that no one knows how industrial hemp will behave in its THC concentration under the hot and dry weather in the low desert. Federal law requires that industrial hemp have a THC content of 0.3 percent or less requirement.

He said the extension office efforts have been slowed because it needs to comply with federal, state and university laws and regulations.

“That is why we do not yet have projects on ground, but this is expected to jump into (production) as of this coming spring,” he said.

The vision is to establish an industrial hemp consortium that would be a global leader in industrial hemp innovation, he said.

The consortium will also help connect academia, industry and government in a rapidly emerging market.

The mission statement is to conduct applied research, identify best practices and publish data and information.

The extension office would also like to let farmers know what the best time is to grow hemp. It will do this by planting the crop at various times of the year.

"People want to know before they grow," he said, "It is difficult to plant something with not knowing."

On the second stop on the hemp tour, Keithly Williams Seeds Nursery Manager Paul Chambers explained to the attendees the importance of getting good seeds.

"It's night and day on the quality of seeds we get," he said. "Make sure you buy from a reputable seed company."

Keithly Williams Seeds Nursery has two hemp growers who work for the company and even grows hemp in Yuma.

Chambers said hemp seedlings, until they can get shade from neighboring plants, often struggle in the beginning stages when there is no shade.

He also explained the need to make sure the hemp crop has good roots. A poor root system leaves no reason to continue with the crop, he said.

Chambers said there are more questions than answers he can provide on industrial hemp right now.

"It's a brand new opportunity for us," he said.