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## Next Steps for West Virginia Industrial Hemp

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**Charleston W.Va.** -- It's undeniable that West Virginia frequently lags behind the rest of the country when it comes to new ideas and innovative solutions. From healthy initiatives to education, West Virginia all too often scores low marks.

One agricultural initiative that West Virginia has been way ahead on is the development of industrial hemp. In 2002, the West Virginia Legislature tasked the West Virginia Department of Agriculture with setting up a program to support industrial hemp research. This program sat dormant until Congress, through the 2014 Farm Bill, allowed industrial hemp research pilot projects to be established under state departments of agriculture. West Virginia again showed foresight in 2017 when the Legislature expanded that pilot project to allow cultivation of industrial hemp for commercial purposes. Almost two years later, Washington D.C. followed suit and legalized hemp on a national scale through the 2018 Farm Bill.

When President Donald Trump signed the new Farm Bill, industrial hemp was separated from its cannabis cousin, marijuana, and therefore removed from the list of scheduled drugs. Now farmers can grow hemp like any other cash crop, transport it across state lines and use the plant in the processing of numerous products. The United States Department of Agriculture will, over the next several months, promulgate rules and regulations. From there, the public will have its say, and the agency will adjust. Once those rules are finalized, West Virginia will submit its plan to manage the state program, based on requirements laid out by the USDA. This process is no different for the numerous other programs the WVDA works in cooperation with USDA.

In the meantime, the WVDA and West Virginia's industrial hemp program will be in a transition period. We will continue to operate under the current rules and

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regulations until the USDA establishes its new framework. The WVDA will work with our farmers to understand these changes as they come down from the federal government. Our goal is to ensure a smooth transition through an “educate before regulate” mentality. We want to grow this industry, not hinder it. It is clear our representatives in Washington support a robust industrial hemp industry in the United States, and they have entrusted state departments of agriculture to carry out their intentions.

What we can say for sure is there’s a lot of excitement around growing industrial hemp. The WVDA has seen a 300 percent increase in applications for the 2019 growing season. Our challenge will be to match this excitement with the resources for proper management. As of right now, the WVDA receives no state or federal support to manage the program. We lag behind states like Kentucky, which will collect upwards of \$500,000 in fees to support four full-time employees. While we work with the Legislature to find ways to bring in more resources, we know we cannot operate this program on the \$9,000 in fees we collect.

We have numerous challenges ahead, but if we work together, West Virginia can tap into this new market. We need support from Governor Jim Justice and our West Virginia Legislature as we work through this process. We need to work with law enforcement to ensure illegal drugs are not being grown alongside legal crops. Farmers will have to understand how to comply with laws while formulating best practices. As the regulatory agency, the WVDA will need to provide more support to our farmers in the early years, as this industry gets off the ground.

My staff and I stand ready to help our farmers take advantage of this new agricultural frontier. Our promise to them is we will work with our federal partners and the Legislature on this and other projects to bring economic diversity to the state. Failure is not an option. We must succeed or continue to fall behind.

Kent A. Leonhardt  
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

*The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.*

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