

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Terrence Nelson's Hemp Bill Placed On Hold For Amendments

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After hours of testimony from people on both sides of the hemp industry discourse, members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture and Planning voted to hold the bill introduced by Senator Terrence Nelson that would legalize the cultivation of industrial hemp in the Virgin Islands.

Hemp is a distinct variety of the plant species *cannabis sativa* L. that contains small amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the primary psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. It is a tall, slender, fibrous plant similar to flax or kenaf.

The Senate Committee decided to hold the bill to allow for more research on the advantages and disadvantages of hemp, and for amendments to be made.

The bill, which seeks to amend VI agriculture laws, Title 7 of VI Code, comes at a time when states across the U.S. are making bold moves to legalize Medicinal Marijuana, and hemp is already legal in various states across the U.S. Yet while hemp is a legal industry in many U.S. states, the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration is still hostile towards its use, and farmers in states such as North Dakota, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Oregon, California, Montana, West Virginia and Vermont have not yet begun to grow it.

Coming out in opposition of the hemp bill, assistant Police Commissioner Thomas Hannah said that it was near impossible to distinguish between hemp and marijuana, and raised the concern of the two plants being grown side-by-side. Hannah also was uneasy because criminals may become involved.

"We have an existing problem where individuals are killing each other over dime bags of marijuana," Hannah said.

Senator Terrence Nelson, for his part, wasn't having it: "You police criminals, not citizens," he fired back.

In support of the bill was Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen, who highlighted four areas of needed research before a formidable hemp industry becomes a reality in the Virgin Islands.

According to Petersen, those areas include researching the cost of hemp production; determining hemp yield under local conditions; determining potential end products that would come from varying strains of hemp; and identifying the appropriate hemp markets that would prove the most profitable for the Virgin Islands.

Among those who testified in support of the hemp bill are Barbara La Ronde, president of the cannabis advocacy group USVI NORML and Paul Chakroff.

When asked by Sen. Nereida Rivera O'Reilly how long it would take to research the impact of a hemp industry in the territory, Peterson said two to three years.