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**PATRICK TESTIN**  
STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Wisconsin Poised to Lead in Hemp Cultivation

When I announced my run for State Senate in January of 2016, I knew very little about hemp or CBD oil. Like many, I was under the false impression that hemp and marijuana were the same plant. Then, shortly after taking office, I started researching the subject. I discovered hemp's rich history in Wisconsin, its diverse uses, and the potential it holds for farmers, processors, retailers, and consumers. I worked with then-Rep. Jesse Kremer to write the Farm Freedom Act, and on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the bill that reintroduced hemp to Wisconsin was signed into law.

In the first year of the program, 250 people grew hemp, and around 100 were involved in processing. Overly wet weather adversely affected many growers, but as we enter year two of the program, more than 1,400 farmers applied for licenses to grow hemp, along with more than 700 processors – and the federal government is taking notice.

Last December, President Trump signed the farm bill, which among other things, removed hemp from the list of controlled substances and also required that states either manage their own programs or cede that responsibility to the USDA. This act greatly increases the potential for hemp, and gives our farmers – who have suffered for years with low commodity prices – a chance to diversify their crop portfolio.

That is why earlier this month I joined my colleagues Rep. Tony Kurtz (R-Wonewoc) – an organic farmer who grows hemp, Senator Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), Rep. Dave Conside (D-Baraboo), to introduce the bi-partisan Growing Opportunities Act – a bill that creates the framework necessary for Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to maintain control of our hemp industry at the state level as we transition from a pilot to a permanent program.

The bill incorporates changes made in the federal farm bill as well as feedback from farmers and processors who had ideas of how the program could run more smoothly. We included a truth in labeling provision that will help ensure that people who purchase hemp products are getting what they pay for.

We have two goals with the Growing Opportunities Act; we want to build confidence at every level of the hemp industry – farmers, processors, retailers, and customers need to have a reasonable regulatory framework that ensures maximum opportunity and safety – and we want to guarantee that Wisconsin will continue to manage the development of this crop. With the right encouragement, Wisconsin can and will lead the nation in hemp production again. That's something we can all get behind.