

Demand for hemp seed drives new crop of growers in Tasmania keen to ride the high

Tas Country Hour

By [Laurissa Smith](#)

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ABC Rural: Laurissa Smith

Close

Australia's booming market for hemp seed in breads, cereals, protein powders and protein bars is spurring on a new wave of growers in Tasmania cashing in on the fast-growing crop.

Hemp seed boom

Key points:

- Tasmania produces 66 per cent of Australia's hemp seed
- The state's crop is worth almost \$5 million at the farm gate
- A crop costs farmers \$1,300 a hectare and pays \$3 a kilogram

The island state already produces almost two thirds of the national commercial hemp crop.

That figure is set to grow on the back of [increased consumer demand for plant-based protein](#) and a supply shortage in other parts of the country due to drought.

Tasmania has been growing hemp on a small scale since the 1990s for fibre and cosmetics.

When laws [changed in 2017 to allow hemp seed to be sold as food](#), farmers began to take the crop more seriously.

Hemp Association of Tasmania president, Tim Schmidt, said the number of growers have jumped from 29 last season to 49 this year.

"Many growers who have been dabbling [in hemp] are now considering long-term plans with the growing of hemp in Tasmania," he said.

A quick crop to grow

York Plains woolgrower Stewart Burbury has been re-evaluating the role that hemp will play in his operation.

"It's been a pretty smooth crop and it's a feel-good crop," he said.

"You water it and go out and look at it and it's grown 8 or 10 centimetres in a day."



[First-time hemp grower Stewart Burbury checks out his crop in Tasmania's southern midlands.](#)

A hemp crop takes around four months to mature at just under 2 metres.

The seed heads are harvested, dried and de-hulled.

Unprecedented demand

Hemp seeds have a mild, nutty flavour and are increasingly finding their way into breads and breakfast cereals.

Australian Primary Hemp in Geelong has contracted just under 400 hectares of hemp from Tasmania in 2019.



[A grain harvester slowly makes its way through a hemp crop at Campbell Town in Tasmania's north.](#)

It is chasing as much as 2,000ha from the state, which is nearly the industry's entire crop.

Operations manager Mitch Costin said the company has seen unprecedented demand for the seed.

"There are a lot of people looking at different uses for the fibre, but we're focussed on the food industry at this stage," he said.

"The protein powder is being used by various markets, but also being included in value-added products, whether its protein bars or cereals."

Mr Costin said the company is working with farmers in Victoria and New South Wales to find varieties that better suits their climates.

First-time Tasmanian grower David Taylor said it is about finding the right window to grow a cash crop in between poppies and potatoes.



[Campbell Town woolgrower David Taylor stands in his first hemp crop.](#)

For the agricultural industry in Tasmania, economically it gives another option for growers out there, and gives them access to new markets of the mainland," he said.

"With Tasmania having a clean, green food image, I think this product works in with that too."

The Tasmanian hemp crop is worth almost \$5 million at the farm gate.

The international food market for hemp seed is estimated at \$1 billion annually.

It costs around \$1,300 a hectare for farmers to grow it, and they are paid around \$3 a kilogram.

"I'd say we probably want to be making \$2,000 a hectare out of it," Stewart Burbury said, a first-time grower.

Margins can easily be eroded by expensive delays in the harvest process as the rope-like stalks of the hemp plant can easily get tangled in equipment.

"An hour harvesting was probably 4 hours cutting it out of the machine which was no good for nobody," contractor Josh Chamley said.



[Harvest contractor Josh Chamley has refined his equipment to speed up the harvest process.](#)

With a quick Google search, 3 hours work in the shed and around \$500 investment Mr Chamley modified his header to eliminate those delays.

"It's been quite simple and hasn't cost the earth but it's really effective."

The hemp crop grown in Tasmanian this year is looking like the best to date.

Tim Schmidt said production will far exceed last year's average of 1 tonne a hectare.