

# Taking Back American Hemp: The Indigenous farmers leading “The New Green Revolution”

“I didn’t get into this for money. I got into this for love.” It was the end of a long and rainy primary day here in Rhode Island, and renowned environmental advocate and indigenous organizer **Winona Laduke** was the first speaker to be featured at URI’s Honors Colloquium. The theme for this fall is ‘Just Good Food,’ and Laduke’s ardent callbacks to a time “when America [truly] was great” (think clean water, millions of buffalo, and biodiverse food systems - not old men in red hats) felt like a fitting way to start the long-running lecture series. Given the topic, I was pleasantly surprised when the projector screen advanced to a photo of Laduke standing tall amongst an even taller sea of green - the hemp fields she has been cultivating on tribal land in northern Minnesota stretching above her head and beyond the frame of the photo.

For indigenous farmers welcoming cannabis seeds back into American soil, hemp may be one of the missing links in a “pre- and post-petroleum” agricultural model — one that could empower tribal nations to seek social, economic, and environmental justice through the unique opportunities of a versatile crop like hemp. Or as Laduke calls it, “a magical plant for the future.” Hemp is widely known to be a forgotten hero of the past, as well. I can recall hearing that at some point in modern American history, farmers were actually *required* to grow a quarter acre each of hemp and flax, but I did not learn until now that the word “canvas” is actually derived from the word “cannabis” — that’s how commonly used the fiber was in the past. The Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 legally separated hemp from marijuana as a crop, and hemp production was encouraged by the government during the 1940s as part of agricultural efforts during World War II. However, under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, hemp was officially classified and criminalized alongside heroin and marijuana as a dangerous, addictive drug. If only we had continued to embrace hemp as the amazing renewable resource it is, instead of rejecting it as a narcotic that would be inaccessible to farmers for decades... According to Laduke, “We had a choice between a carbohydrate economy and a hydrocarbon economy, and we made the wrong choice.” She believes that everything we have done with oil, could have been done with hemp — a regenerative crop that can remediate soils and sequester carbon faster than any other field crop.

Winona has partnered with the Anishinaabe Agriculture Institute in Minnesota to cultivate and test fiber hemp varieties for textile processing on tribal land, as well as provide community programming and hemp seed stock to other tribes with an interest in the crop. The vision of their Tribal Hemp Initiative is clear - “We need a New Green Revolution, which deconstructs industrial agriculture and rebuilds soil and community. At the center of that revolution in this region is industrial hemp, which can transform the materials economy...we are working to restore food ways, rematriate seeds, and make a new economy; one based on local food, energy and fiber.” By the end of her talk, the significance of Winona’s Hemp as a key component of her talk on “Restoring Indigenous Foodways in a Time of Climate Change” became abundantly clear.

Growing hemp can also be an act of defiance. At least it must have felt that way for **Alex White Plume**, a tribal leader who has been growing hemp on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota since the nineties, long before it was considered legal or lucrative. Despite an ordinance passed by the Oglala Lakota in 1998 legalizing the cultivation of hemp on Pine Ridge, White Plume’s hemp fields were raided multiple times by the DEA between 2000 and 2002 (sound familiar?!), and he was finally ordered to stop

growing in 2004. It would be another 12 years before the federal ban on hemp was lifted and Alex could pick up where he left off. Alex's experience is "illustrative of the way indigenous people have been stymied in their attempt to use hemp as an economic driver for themselves and their communities." (northeastern.edu) After the passage of the 2018 Farm Bill that legalized hemp production in the United States, states and tribal nations were encouraged to submit individualized hemp programs, as long as minimum requirements set by the USDA were met in each plan.

These days, with the USDA finally back on the hemp train, over two dozen tribes have now had their hemp plans approved, but there are still plenty of barriers that can present challenges for indigenous farmers entering the hemp space. In order to strengthen the economic multiplier effect of the hemp industry for tribal nations, there will need to be an integrated network of producers, manufacturers, and ancillary businesses working together to create a diverse and competitive industry. That's why Chickasaw Nation member **Aaron Fournier** started Native American Hemp, an Oklahoma-based company that offers support services to assist tribes across the country in navigating the various points of entry into the hemp industry. Similarly, other organizations like the Native American Cannabis Alliance, and the Indigenous Production Trade Alliance, work to build community and industry support among tribal nations.

*\*URI Honors Colloquium lecture series takes place on Tuesday evenings at 7pm, through Dec 13 - located at Edwards Auditorium in Kingston and streaming online*