

Zimbabwe Sets Industrial Hemp THC Limit At 1%: Why Does It Matter?



Figure 1: Industrial hemp (*Cannabis sativa* L.) genetics research and development at the Tobacco Research Board (TRB), Harare, Zimbabwe. Photo credit: TRB.

Background

The industrial hemp (*Cannabis sativa* L.) plant has long been a versatile, valuable plant, but prohibition policies prevented it from being widely used in many countries for decades. The walls of industrial hemp prohibition have crumbled in recent years, and the global appeal of the products has grown. As a result, several countries have responded by modifying their national legislation to allow for the widespread cultivation of industrial hemp. This is especially true for the laws that regulate cannabidiol (CBD) products and the allowed quantities of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) - the major psychoactive component in cannabis in those products. In 2018, Zimbabwe became the second African country to legalize medicinal cannabis/marijuana production for medical and scientific purposes. With 2023 less than a month old, Zimbabwe is now poised to follow this up with amended industrial hemp legislation set to take effect early this year.

Progressive legislation in Zimbabwe

Small and Cronquist (1976) generated scientific research that led to the 0.3% THC distinction between hemp and medicinal cannabis/marijuana. Despite the authors' argument that the 0.3% THC content criterion was strictly a taxonomic consideration,

the world has been stuck with this arbitrary legal definition ever since. Zimbabwe joins Australia, Ecuador, Malawi, Switzerland and Uruguay in increasing the THC level allowed in industrial hemp from 0.3 to 1%. There are indications that the legal framework is moving in a more liberal direction. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Bill, 2002 is proposing the amendment of section 155 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] (hereinafter referred to as 'the Act') to remove 'industrial hemp' from the list of dangerous drugs. The amendment bill also introduces a legal definition of "industrial hemp", which is defined as a plant *Cannabis sativa* L. and any part of the plant, including the seed thereof and all derivatives, extracts, cannabinoids, isomers, acids, salts, and salts of isomers, whether growing or not with a delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol concentration of not more than 1% on a dry weight basis.

Zimbabwe, like Australia, Ecuador, Malawi, Switzerland, and Uruguay, will have entered into a conflict with the United Nations international drug convention, which still dictates global drugs policy more than 60 years after it was enacted. However, by amending the legislation and providing clarified definitions as outlined in the Amendment Bill 2022, Zimbabwe is establishing an environment in which a wider range of line mixes and ultimately hemp varieties may be produced and supplied. A significant step forward for the Zimbabwean hemp industry.

Advantages of raising the legal THC content of industrial hemp from 0.3 to 1%

Although a 1% THC limit may not appear to be much, it is a relatively liberal threshold when compared to other nation's standards, such as the US, which has a maximum of only 0.3%. An increased THC level gives industrial hemp farmers, greater options when selecting genetics to cultivate and allows for the production of a broader range of markets (i.e., 0 to 1%). This is particularly important because studies have shown that certain genetics that combines CBD and THC ratios produces interesting fiber qualities and also an entourage effect with synergistic therapeutic benefits from the CBD flowers. As new CBD products are currently being tested by the Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe (MCAZ), they may be more effective and hence more appealing to consumers and patients not only in Zimbabwe but also in the region and abroad. A step in the right direction for Zimbabwe's prospective fiber and CBD industry.

Implications of this new breakthrough for TRB's research and development

The Tobacco Research Board known by its acronym, TRB, was given a directive by its parent Ministry to '*reform and restructure by 2025*', asserting itself as the centre for National Research, Development, and Innovation in tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) and alternatives and alternates. This is in accordance with Vision 2030 – with an objective of accelerating agricultural profitability and development in Zimbabwe. Among the crops of interest in the alternative crops research is industrial hemp. TRB has been testing and developing hemp varieties that are adapted to Zimbabwe's climatic conditions over the last few years.

The 0.3% THC requirement, is an arbitrary quantity that makes it difficult for breeders to create and grow varieties with other desirable synergistic properties. THC levels, for example, are critical for CBD production in hemp plants. A CBD product with a low THC content may be ineffective. In addition, if the THC level of industrial hemp is indeed increased (from 0.3 to 1%), TRB will have additional opportunities for enhancing and expanding its research capabilities. More specifically, the breakthrough expands prospects for importing germplasm for the development of better-adapted varieties for Zimbabwe and the region.



Figure 2: Industrial hemp (*Cannabis sativa* L.) seed and genetics research and development at the Tobacco Research Board (TRB), Harare and Banket sites in Zimbabwe. Photo credit: TRB.

For more information, contact Kutsaga Research Station's Plant Breeding Division on voip number +263868 800 2604 or Email: tobres@kutsaga.co.zw or visit Kutsaga Research Station, Airport Ring Road, Harare.