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discussed during a discussion at the Kentucky Commodities Conference.

Jan. 21, 2013

Legalizing industrial hemp in Kentucky, passing a federal farm bill and helping young farmers establish themselves were among subjects U.S. Sen. Rand Paul and Agriculture Commissioner James Comer took on Friday evening during a discussion at the Kentucky Commodities Conference.

Paul said Kentucky might be able to get a waiver, similar to waivers given for the No Child Left Behind education law, to grow industrial hemp if state legislation to allow its cultivation passes. Paul has also supported a federal bill to legalize industrial hemp growth.

"I think the potential's enormous for something like this," the Bowling Green Republican said at the event, which was held at the Holiday Inn University Plaza. There is resistance to such legislation from some law enforcement groups because of the plant's similarity to marijuana, he said.

"It looks somewhat similar, that's what they're concerned about, but we live in a modern age," Paul said. "If you get a permit from Commissioner Comer and they put in the GPS, every sheriff and every policeman would know where it's going to be grown."

Bills have been filed in both houses of the Kentucky General Assembly to allow people who wish to grow industrial hemp to be licensed through the Department of Agriculture. Comer said industrial hemp is a crop with potential.

"I believe that 10 years from now we will look at industrial hemp the same as soybean," he said. "It's a crop that continues to have new uses every day."

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Curtis Dame, Hopkins County extension agent for agriculture and natural resources, said he doesn't have an opinion on whether industrial hemp should be legalized. However, he thinks many young farmers would embrace the opportunity to try growing a new crop.

"If that opportunity were to become available, I know that that crop could be used in Hopkins County due to our marginal land that we do have from coal mining," he said. Dame, 24, also works on his family's farm in Jewel City. He said the inheritance, or estate, tax is one of many barriers to young farmers.

When asked about ways to help young farmers, Paul spoke about repealing the inheritance tax to ease the burden on young people who inherit family farms.

"A lot of farmers may be land rich and cash poor," he said. A repeal would require a major change in the people being elected to Congress, Paul said.

Comer said there's a mindset among young people that they can't make money in farming, and mentoring programs are important in changing minds.

"We want to inspire young people to go into production agriculture," he said.

Paul also told conference participants that he believes a new farm bill will be passed, but he would like to see food stamp spending separated from the bill. The bill sets national agriculture, nutrition, conservation and forestry policy and includes funding for agriculture programs.

In January, Congress passed a nine-month extension of the 2008 farm bill, according to The Associated Press.

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