

Speaker Spotlight: David Whitethunder Trottier



**The role of tribal businesses taking on the
global plastic the crisis**

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David WhiteThunder Trottier of Chippewa Harvest is helping pioneer the development of the industrial hemp industry in Indian Country. His work demonstrates the potential for Tribal enterprises to develop sustainable agricultural products, create economic opportunities, and contribute to solutions for the growing global plastic crisis.

During the Native American Fiber Program (NAFP) webinar, David discussed the opportunities and challenges associated with growing industrial hemp, including its potential applications in food production, fiber development, and alternatives to plastic. His presentation highlighted the importance of building the infrastructure, partnerships, and markets needed to support a developing hemp industry in Tribal communities.

Education and Awareness About Industrial Hemp

One of the challenges facing industrial hemp development is public understanding of the difference between industrial hemp and marijuana. David emphasized that education is essential to addressing misconceptions among community members, Elders, and Tribal leadership.

Although industrial hemp and marijuana are varieties of the same plant species, *Cannabis sativa*, industrial hemp is cultivated to meet legal THC limits. David explained that Chippewa Harvest uses certified seed and tests its crops before harvest to verify THC levels. He noted that the hemp grown by Chippewa Harvest has tested at zero THC. Through education and outreach, Tribal communities can better understand industrial hemp's potential applications and make informed decisions about its role in agricultural and economic development.



David Whitethunder Trottier, standing in a field of Hemp in Belcourt, ND

Opportunities for Tribal Agriculture and Economic Development

David explained that the profitability of industrial hemp depends on the intended use of the crop, access to markets, production costs, and the infrastructure available to process and distribute the harvest.

Hemp hearts, in particular, represent an opportunity for food production and commercial markets. David highlighted their nutritional value and simple ingredient profile, noting the potential for hemp-based foods to contribute to a diversified food system.



Truck unloading Hemp hearts in silos Belcourt, ND

However, entering the hemp industry requires a long-term commitment. Rising fertilizer costs, significant equipment investments, limited infrastructure, and uncertainty around market development can make it difficult for smaller operations to achieve profitability. David emphasized the importance of identifying potential buyers and establishing markets before investing heavily in production.

He also discussed the need for additional government support, including reconsideration of agricultural insurance policies and opportunities for hemp hearts to be recognized within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's commodity food programs. Such measures, he explained, could help strengthen demand and provide greater support for farmers interested in growing hemp.

Chippewa Harvest planted approximately 100 acres of hemp during the year discussed in the webinar, reflecting the impact of increased production costs. David also shared that building a successful hemp business can take many years, underscoring the importance of long-term planning, diversification, and sustained investment.

Hemp and the Future of Sustainable Materials

The conversation also explored the potential for industrial hemp to support the development of alternatives to conventional plastic products. Hemp fiber, along with other plant-based materials such as bamboo and cotton, offers opportunities to explore more sustainable approaches to manufacturing and product development.

Fred Briones highlighted the potential relevance of hemp as California considers future agricultural opportunities and advances efforts related to plastic waste reduction, including California's SB 54 legislation.



As agricultural landscapes change, hemp may offer another crop for consideration, provided that appropriate markets, processing capabilities, and regulatory requirements are in place.

The NAFPP discussion emphasized the value of connecting agricultural producers, Tribal enterprises, researchers, and industry partners to advance these opportunities. Developing plant-based alternatives to plastic could support both economic development and broader environmental goals.

Building the Future Through Tribal Leadership

The development of industrial hemp in Indian Country represents more than the introduction of a new agricultural crop. It is an opportunity for Tribal communities to build businesses, strengthen economic self-determination, develop new partnerships, and participate in emerging sustainable industries.

David's experience with Chippewa Harvest illustrates both the promise and the challenges of establishing a hemp enterprise. Continued education, investment, market development, and supportive public policies will be important to the industry's future.

The Native American Fiber Program recognizes the significance of this pioneering work and the importance of sharing knowledge across Tribal communities. By bringing together Indigenous leadership, agricultural innovation, and sustainable material development, Tribal enterprises can help shape new approaches to food production, fiber applications, and alternatives to plastic.

As the industry continues to evolve, collaboration and long-term vision will be essential to building resilient Tribal economies and expanding opportunities for future generations.

