

# Utah farmers and entrepreneurs compete to grow medical pot

July 12 2019, by Morgan Smith

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In this Tuesday, July 2, 2019 photo, Darren Johnson, a hemp processor, holds raw hemp that will be used to make CBD oil at his processing facility, Wasatch Extraction, in Salt Lake City. Johnson is one of 81 applicants vying for a medical marijuana growers license in Utah. (AP Photo/Morgan Smith)

The wide metal barn on the Utah alfalfa farm owned by Russell and Diane Jones will host their youngest son's wedding next month. By September, they hope the structure will be full of marijuana plants.

The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants for one of a handful of coveted spots as a licensed [medical marijuana](#) grower in conservative Utah.

Though leaders of their faith once opposed the bid to legalize medical [marijuana](#), Russell Jones says he researched the drug's pain-relieving benefits as he battled Hodgkin's lymphoma. Now he and his wife want to be part of an emerging industry that some doubted would ever come to the state.

"This is groundbreaking for Utah," Diane Jones said. "Who doesn't want to make history?"

Others hoping to win licenses include larger operations that grow hemp, and a handful of out-of-state growers. State officials are expected to begin awarding up to 10 licenses later this month.

The state recently opened the licensing process to out-of-state growers, a change that makes locals like hemp processor Darren Johnson nervous.

"Does it bode well for me? No, but they want it to be seamless. They don't want hiccups. And I get that," he said.



In this Monday, July 8, 2019 photo, Troy Young, a hemp grower in North Salt Lake, stops for breakfast at a nearby coffee shop before returning to his indoor grow facility. Young, who recently applied for a medical marijuana growers license in Utah, lost his mother to an opioid addiction. If she had access to less destructive pain-relieving drug, like marijuana, Young said maybe she'd still be alive. (AP Photo/Morgan Smith)

Some applicants worry the process stacks the deck against local growers in favor of "Big Weed," or companies that have successfully grown cannabis in other states where the crop is legal. The application requires a \$2,500 fee, and submissions are hundreds of pages long. Those who get a license pay \$100,000 every year to keep it, in addition to buying

tools and facilities that can cost millions.

Department of Agriculture officials said they are awarding extra points to applicants with community ties as they review applications. Eight applications came from out-of-state growers. The state is looking for farmers able to expand operations as demand increases while keeping costs low and growing plants free of mold and pesticides.

At an indoor facility in North Salt Lake, Troy Young tends to rows of hemp plants under the harsh, purple glow of LED lights designed to nurture growth. Young grows industrial hemp, a nonpsychoactive cousin of marijuana legalized in Utah last year.

He is among a number of ambitious growers who have invested in equipment and set aside money hoping to receive a license to grow medical marijuana.

Cannabis in its various forms is challenging to grow and requires a lot of experimentation, he said.



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell Jones holds alfalfa on his farm, in Nephi, Utah. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell Jones looks at alfalfa on his farm, in Nephi, Utah. Next month, the wide metal barn on the Utah alfalfa farm owned by Russell and Diane Jones will host their youngest son's wedding; but by September, they hope the structure will be full of marijuana plants. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell Jones looks at his alfalfa as he walks in his field, in Nephi, Utah. Next month, the wide metal barn on the Utah alfalfa farm owned by Russell and Diane Jones will host their youngest son's wedding, and by September, they hope the structure will be full of marijuana plants. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers and are among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell Jones looks at his alfalfa as he walks in his field, in Nephi, Utah. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)





In this Monday, July 8, 2019 photo provided by Troy Young, hemp plants grow under the harsh, purple glow of LED lights at an indoor facility in North Salt Lake. Young, the manager of the facility, recently applied for a medical marijuana growers license in Utah. He said hemp and cannabis plants are both challenging to grow and require a lot of experimentation. (Troy Young via AP)



In this Monday, July 8, 2019 photo provided by Troy Young, hemp plants grow under the purple glow of LED lights at an indoor facility in North Salt Lake. Young, the manager of the facility, recently applied for a medical marijuana growers license in Utah. He said hemp and cannabis plants are both challenging to grow and require a lot of experimentation. (Troy Young via AP)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Diane Jones looks at her alfalfa field, in Nephi, Utah. Next month, the wide metal barn on the Utah alfalfa farm owned by Russell and Diane Jones will host their youngest son's wedding; but by September, they hope the structure will be full of marijuana plants. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



In this Tuesday, July 2, 2019 photo, Brent Steffensen, a hemp extractor at the processing facility Wasatch Extraction, uses a machine to extract fats, waxes and lipids from a raw hemp plant that are not used in CBD oil. Industrial hemp, a non-psychoactive cousin of marijuana, was legalized in Utah last year. (AP Photo/Morgan Smith)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell and Diane Jones stand in front of alfalfa at their farm, in Nephi, Utah. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in Utah. Jones says he researched the drug's pain-relieving benefits as he battled Hodgkin's lymphoma, and he and his wife now want to be part of an emerging industry that some doubted would ever come to the state. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



In this Wednesday, June 26, 2019, photo, Russell Jones walks in his alfalfa field on his farm, in Nephi, Utah. The Joneses are fourth-generation farmers, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and among 81 applicants vying for one of a handful of coveted spots as state-licensed medical growers in conservative Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

"It's fun for me. I get to be a mad scientist," said Young, 52. He has a personal stake in marijuana legalization. Young lost his mother to an opioid addiction. If she had access to a less destructive pain-relieving drug, like marijuana, he said, maybe she'd still be alive.

Marijuana has been shown to help ease chronic pain, and studies have suggested medical marijuana laws may reduce opioid prescribing.

"There's a real need for it. It's not just about the high," Young said.

Johnson, the hemp processor, has a spacious warehouse in Salt Lake City with a team of technicians and equipment primed to grow medical marijuana. One room is filled with large beakers. Sticky hemp drips through paper filters and into the glass to extract CBD oil.

Hemp is his side business. Johnson works [full-time](#) in construction but views cultivating marijuana as a smart, long-term investment.



In this Tuesday, July 2, 2019 photo, Brent Steffensen, a hemp extractor at the processing facility Wasatch Extraction, uses a machine to extract fats, waxes and lipids from a raw hemp plant that are not used in CBD oil. Industrial hemp, a non-psychoactive cousin of marijuana, was legalized in Utah last year. (AP Photo/Morgan Smith)

"Once (medical marijuana) becomes less taboo and people opt for that over an opiate-based drug, we're going to see more demand and a stronger market," he said.

Revenues from the state's medical cannabis program are projected to reach \$5.4 million in 2020 then grow to \$16.2 million in 2021, said Richard Oborn, director of the state health department's Center of Medical Cannabis.

Utah joined 33 states in legalizing medical marijuana after voters approved a new law last year.

Leaders of the state's predominant faith originally opposed the push to ask voters to approve medical marijuana but eventually struck a compromise with some advocates to allow medicinal use of the drug with more regulation.

Whoever wins the state's 10 grower licenses will have to grow the cannabis in Utah. The state also will choose licensed processors to make medical marijuana products to be sold in dispensaries expected to open next year.

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