

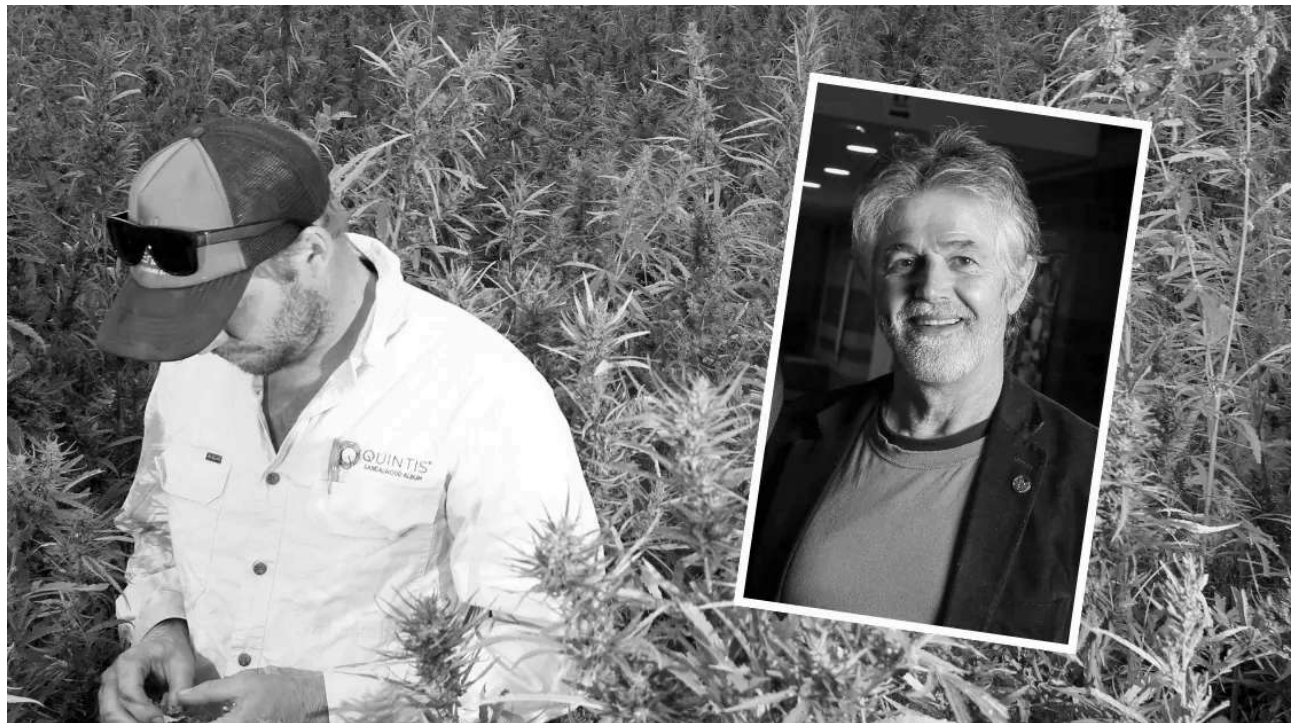
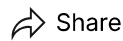


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Paddock to petrol in 100 days: how hemp could solve the current fuel shortage



By Barry Murphy
March 17 2026 - 6:00am



Australian Industrial Hemp Alliance president Charles Kovess (inset) says hemp could solve Australia's fuel supply risk. File pictures

As the wheels of war in the Middle East continue to disrupt global fuel supplies and prices, Australian hemp growers are saying a solution lies in plain sight.

While ramping up hemp production has been a "chicken and egg" process for a number of years, growers say that now, more than ever,

is the time to act.

Australian Industrial Hemp Alliance president Charles Kovess said hemp "resolved our risk of unavailable petrol and diesel".

Mr Kovess, in line with several logistics experts of late, warned that Australia's fuel security was far weaker than many acknowledged.

He highlighted recent comments made by Australian Logistics Council chief executive Hermione Parsons, who suggested national fuel reserves could be as low as 20 days, and said this could have a major impact on farmers.

He said at a time of such depleted national reserves, along with a shortage of construction supplies, policymakers should explore the further development of the hemp industry.

He said conflating cannabis and a highly productive, climate-friendly and sustainable hemp crop was like conflating grape juice with wine.

He said the two needed "totally different" regulation, and hemp production should lie solely at the doors of each state's agriculture department.

Hemp produces three main products including fibre (used in clothing), hurd (the stalk used in building materials and ethanol production) and seed (pressed to produce biofuel).

Cropper potential

Mr Kovess said the crop could be grown across most of Australia, with different seed varieties available for different climates.

Crucially, he said a hemp crop required 80 per cent less water than cotton, and that from seed to harvest, hemp could be grown in 100 days.

He said a crop could be grown in the same paddock twice a year.

"The beauty of hemp is that I can sign a contract today and in 100 days I can provide that huge amount of raw materials," he said.

When it comes to biofuel, a fuel which most cars and vehicles can run on without modification, hemp can produce 700-1000 litres a hectare, depending on conditions.

Vehicles and machinery could also run on hemp's ethanol, albeit with significant modification, and this too could help alleviate fuel shortages.

Mr Kovess said hemp did not require major machinery investment, and it could be harvested in multiple ways, depending on the market supplied to.

The crop can be baled, for example.

"It's essentially just cutting grass that's 3-4 metres high," he said.

He suggested the return for farmers growing hemp depended on their selling approach but it could range from \$2000-\$7000 a hectare.

'Chicken and egg situation'

So, with all the benefits, why isn't there a rush on hemp seed, and an explosion in production?

Mr Kovess said the answer was simple – the market had not yet developed, due to political red tape, and a lack of investment in supply chain infrastructure.

"Australian farmers are ready to grow hemp and enjoy the upside in profits," he said.

"But the farmers aren't growing it yet because the demand isn't there.

"We have this chicken and egg situation."

A Senate inquiry into what is blocking a thriving hemp industry that started in Tasmania last July remains ongoing.

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With a 12-month timeline, it is understood further hearings are to take place this year in both Melbourne and Canberra.

The Victorian Parliament is currently reviewing its own legislation on the matter.

Mr Kovess said "reasonable and sensible" regulations, which left hemp production with no connection to drug control, were required.

He also said the AIHA was calling for greater investment in the infrastructure to process and use biofuels.

He said all first responders should be dressed in hemp textiles, which were more breathable than most fibres, and building and construction materials should be using hemp.

In line with this, he said the AIHA was aiming to see a million hectares of hemp grown in Australia by 2030.

He said this would produce a "bucket load" of raw materials for the Australian economy, at a time of geopolitical insecurity, and without the need to mine for coal or oil.

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He said farmers could benefit in two ways, including the profit and income diversification opportunities in hemp, and the availability of sustainable biofuel.

He said work needed to be done to make this a reality, and called for policymakers to grasp the opportunity by the horns.

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