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Awareness and Perceptions of Hemp

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As producers, extension agents, specialists, and policy makers engage with the public about hemp related topics, a central issue is the confusion between hemp and marijuana. Though hemp and marijuana are technically the same species (*Cannabis sativa* L.), they are significantly different from one another. A plant with content of 0.3% or less dry weight of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is considered hemp, while a plant with greater than 0.3% dry weight of THC is considered marijuana. This definition was standardized by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. Other than THC levels, hemp and marijuana have many of the same physical features and are produced in similar ways. Thereby, telling the difference between hemp and marijuana can be difficult.

The misperceptions that hemp and marijuana are the same will create the need for education. Using data from a 2019 survey of respondents throughout the Southeastern U.S., nine Southeastern U.S. states were surveyed with between 200-250 respondents from each of Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee and approximately 450 from Georgia.

As noted in Table 1, between 5% and 15% of respondents were not even aware of the term hemp. Notably, the two states with the lowest percent of respondents not aware (i.e. greatest awareness of hemp) (Kentucky and Tennessee) have the largest existing hemp production of the states surveyed, which most likely contributed to the awareness level of respondents in those states. However, between 40% and 48% of respondents perceived hemp to be marijuana. Putting this in perspective, four out of every ten adult residents that extension comes into contact will have this incorrect perception. Therefore, it is essential for extension agents to understand this misperception and work towards providing informative material to residents as well as material that can be distributed to stakeholders, policy makers, and law enforcement officials. As we see issues with accepting production, processing, and the resulting regulations, education is going to be key to the success of hemp operations.

Table 1. Awareness and Perceptions of Hemp.

	Perception of Hemp		
	Not Aware (%)	Hemp not Marijuana (%)	Hemp = Marijuana (%)
Alabama	12.6	39.7	47.7
Florida	14.7	43.7	41.6
Georgia	12.8	44.3	43.0
Kentucky	10.5	49.5	40.0
Louisiana	13.5	43.3	43.3
Mississippi	14.1	41.7	44.3
North Carolina	12.8	45.5	41.7
South Carolina	11.7	43.7	44.5
Tennessee	5.2	48.0	46.8

