

JUPITER

MAGAZINE

HOME GROWN

A PEEK INSIDE THE LIFE OF ONE LOCAL FAMILY

PHOTO OP:
AN ARTIST'S TAKE ON
FLORIDA NATURE

BUSINESS BOOM:
THE CANNABIS
INDUSTRY



The GREEN RUSH

THE OTHERWISE CONSERVATIVE TREASURE COAST IS QUIETLY
BECOMING FLORIDA'S CANNABIS HEADQUARTERS

by ERIC BARTON

In just a few years, the Treasure Coast might well become an international hub for one of the country's fastest-growing industries, with a major research center helping to lure start-ups and other companies to the area. This may all sound familiar, but it isn't about Scripps and the biotech industry. It's about an industry that is only recently legal but that already employs thousands of people locally: cannabis.

"There are deep agriculture roots in Martin and St. Lucie counties, and there's a potential for this business to be a good economic driver for the foreseeable future," says Brady Cobb, a graduate of Martin County High School and founder of a cannabis start-up that is now worth multimillions. With a government-supported research lab (the U.S. Horticultural Research Laboratory) and thousands of acres of farmland that could potentially be converted to grow houses, it seems an area known for its largely conservative culture could soon become home to a not-so-conservative, booming industry.

An attorney with his own law firm, Cobb got into the finance side of the cannabis business in 2012 and also began lobbying in Tallahassee and D.C. for changes to laws surrounding marijuana. His interest in it all was sparked while he was taking care of his ailing father, Clyde Walton "Bill" Cobb, who decades ago became a drug smuggler after an unexpected encounter. He had been on his Pensacola farm one day when a tractor-trailer broke down nearby. The drivers asked the elder Cobb if they could store some things in his barn for a bit; in exchange, they promised him \$70,000. Cobb agreed—and that decision served as the first step in becoming a major dealer for Pablo Escobar. Cobb was arrested on smuggling charges in 1983 and served time in prison. Once he was released, he fell ill with prostate cancer, which would eventually take his life in 2010.

He smoked marijuana to ease his pain and, seeing how much it helped his father, the younger Cobb decided he wanted to do something to help others. In 2018, he bought a small medical marijuana company, which he renamed One Plant, and began

From top: Cobb calls his One Plant greenhouse staff a "dream team of cannabis cultivators and purists"; a One Plant dispensary in Port St. Lucie.



the task of quickly scaling it up. He started out in 2020 with one dispensary and a small grove in Ruskin on Florida's west coast. By the end of the year, he had opened seven dispensaries and had built a brand-new, 54,000-square-foot cultivation facility in Indiantown, employing 265 people across the state. Last year, he took the company public, and this past January, he negotiated a merger with Cresco Labs for \$213 million in stock.

Cobb says it made sense to base his business in the area. From a distribution standpoint, Indiantown is only a couple of hours from both Orlando and Miami. And the local government, he says, "has been a partner, and the support has been tremendous."

Florida's medical marijuana laws require any company selling marijuana to be vertically integrated, meaning a firm like One Plant must grow the plants and have its own distribution system and retail operation. One Plant's facility in Indiantown is among the state's most technologically advanced. The hybrid greenhouse, which sits on a 33-acre farm, houses 10 5,000-square-foot cultivation rooms, each with customizable climate control and adjustable shade or sun systems, depending on what the plants need. The irrigation and fertigation system also can infuse CO2 when the plants need it. Because the greenhouse so closely controls the climate, it can operate in a "perpetual harvest," meaning that staff harvests and replants one of the flowering rooms every seven days. "Our team takes a tremendous amount of pride in how clean the garden is and how happy and healthy our plants are," says Cobb, who calls his greenhouse staff a "dream team of cannabis cultivators and purists." To track how the plants are

doing, the company created a proprietary tech program called AllLeaves. And to get the product to customers, One Plant utilizes an e-commerce platform and a home delivery system.

Cobb isn't the only one who has realized the geographic benefits of the Treasure Coast. One Plant may soon be surrounded by many more cannabis companies, says Roger Brown, CEO and president of ACS Laboratory, which has offices in Boca Raton and a cannabis research facility near Tampa. According to Brown, Martin and St. Lucie counties have the available farmland and existing farmers that the cannabis industry needs. "Driving out to the One Plant facility, you see that it's surrounded by farmland," he says. "That land is owned by pretty substantial





Inside a greenhouse at the One Plant cultivation facility in Indiantown

corporate growers. All of those farms are revenue-producing, and are they going to make more money growing ornamental flowers or strawberries than they are growing marijuana or hemp?"

It's a rhetorical question. Medical marijuana has only been legal in Florida since 2016, yet the industry recorded more than \$1.2 billion in sales last year. By 2030, the industry is expected to hit \$6 billion in annual sales here. The industry grew 93 percent in its first year, and Florida now has nearly half a million medical marijuana patients. Fifteen thousand local cannabis-related jobs were added last year, bringing the number of Floridians working in the industry to more than 30,000. The cannabis industry is so important to the state that dispensary employees were labeled "essential workers" during the pandemic lockdown.

Part of the reason the Treasure Coast has become a hub for cannabis start-ups is owed to a St. Lucie County research lab that is run jointly by the University of Florida and the USDA.



Dirty Lemons, one of the cannabis strains grown at One Plant

The Fort Pierce facility, the U.S. Horticultural Research Laboratory, conducts hemp research, among other things, and there is a proposal on the table to turn it into a major international



Clockwise from top left: Jupiter local Michael Cammarata, president and CEO of Neptune Wellness Solutions; rendering of Neptune's new U.S. headquarters in Jupiter; Neptune produces cannabinoids that are used in CBD oil as well as household products like deodorant and cleaners.



could be used in many of the products Cammarata's company produced, but nobody was producing the number of cannabinoids the health and beauty industry needed to make the switch. So in 2019, he invested millions of his own money into Neptune and turned it into a cannabinoid-producing specialist. And it's clear there is a market for it: Neptune nearly doubled in growth in the past year alone. At Neptune's new U.S. headquarters in Jupiter, Cammarata will focus on producing cannabinoids that can be used in all kinds of products, while also working on federal and state cannabis legislation and educating Americans on the uses of cannabis as a super ingredient.

Even as the Treasure Coast continues to see a boom in the cannabis industry, other parts of the state aren't yet as welcoming to the growing business. There are more than 270 dispensaries currently operating in Florida today—with about a dozen in Martin and St. Lucie counties alone—but Jupiter, for one, has banned dispensaries within town limits. Cannabis law expert Dustin Robinson says that will likely change soon, citing evidence that "70 percent of Florida voters" support legal dispensaries and that Jupiter residents currently simply travel to Stuart dispensaries or opt to have product delivered to their homes from companies outside of town.

The bottom line, says Brown, is that it all comes down to money. As long as marijuana is classified as medicine, the state can't tax it and get in on what is quickly becoming one of the most profitable industries around. If it is converted to recreational use in the future, that opens up the door for hundreds of millions in tax revenue a year for Florida.

That lure of tax revenue is changing what it means to lobby

research hub with marijuana cultivation areas, says Jeff Greene, a Fort Lauderdale-based lobbyist for the Florida Hemp Council. Greene suspects that will happen soon, and when it does, it will likely bring even more marijuana, hemp, and CBD companies to the area.

This new world of legal cannabis isn't just about patients who buy medical marijuana and CBD oil at dispensaries to treat ailments. Among the many cannabis-related companies here is Neptune Wellness Solutions, a Canadian company that is in the midst of relocating its headquarters to Jupiter. Neptune specializes in extracting compound cannabinoids from the marijuana plant to be used in products ranging from deodorant to household cleaners, says President and CEO Michael Cammarata. "This plant is a super ingredient," he says. "It's going to change beauty items, home items, and the medicine cabinet, all for different purposes."

Cammarata, a Jupiter local, came to this realization about cannabis back when he was CEO of Schmidt's Naturals. The company was looking for plant-based ingredients that could replace chemicals (like aluminum in deodorant). Research showed that cannabinoids



COURTESY OF NEPTUNE WELLNESS SOLUTIONS





Jeff Greene, a lobbyist for the Florida Hemp Council, says he hopes to transform the U.S. Horticultural Research Laboratory in Fort Pierce into a major hub for cannabis research, with cultivation areas like those shown here.



for cannabis laws. When Cobb first got into the industry, he says he “couldn’t get a call back from the people who make the coffee” in Tallahassee, and his family questioned why he was getting into such a controversial business. Today, the cannabis industry is a powerful lobbying force, and those same family members are now asking him how they can get a medical marijuana card. Says Cobb: “The responses and narratives have shifted so dramatically.” ♦

THE CANNABIS PUBLICIST

Durée Ross had been in the publicity business for nearly 20 years when she got a call that stumped her. It was from a real estate developer who was investing in a CBD company, and he needed her help promoting it. She remembers thinking, *CBD? As in marijuana?* She had little first-hand experience in that area, but for years she had been splitting her time between South Florida and Colorado, so she knew cannabis had already become a big industry in other parts of the country. She quickly assembled her team at Durée & Company and set them on a task: They were to learn everything they could about marijuana, from research and legal issues to the science and what it does to the body. “As a publicist, if you’re selling a product, you have to understand it and you have to believe it,” she says. Today, her agency represents all kinds of companies and advocacy groups related to the cannabis industry; cannabis-related clients, including One Plant and the Florida Hemp Council, now represent a third of her firm’s overall business, and she’s expecting that number to grow. “An entirely new industry doesn’t often just pop up,” she says, “and we were able to get in on the ground floor.” dureeandcompany.com



ALEXANDRA PHOTOGRAPHY