A California Company Believes It Has Invented a Viable Marijuana Breathalyzer

While consumers, entrepreneurs and local governments welcome the legalization of medical and recreational marijuana, it's been something of a headache for law enforcement.

One key issue is the lack of a standardized procedure to determine whether someone is driving under the influence of cannabis.

It's a complex problem to tackle. For example, having marijuana in the bloodstream doesn't translate to being impaired, because marijuana stays in the bloodstream for days. And the "smell test" isn't going to work, as marijuana smoke can linger for hours.

Even scientists disagree on what constitutes impaired, and local laws are all over the place on the issue.

Enter Hound Labs of Oakland, Calif.

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Breath Test innovation

The Golden State will begin recreational marijuana sales on Jan. 1. It's expected to become one of the world's largest legal adult-use marijuana markets (at least until Canada makes it legal across the nation this summer, as expected).

For law enforcement officials, there are understandable worries about what this will mean in terms of patrolling roads. Without a standardized test for marijuana DUI, officers will be handcuffed on what they can do, no matter what they

might suspect.

Hound Labs believes the answer is in the breath. The company has developed a breathalyzer than can detect levels of THC. THC is the active ingredient in marijuana that causes the "high" feeling. The company argues that THC levels in the breath are the best indication of impairment from marijuana.

Hound Labs is testing the third and potentially final version of the machine now. "It's a huge technological and scientific challenge that we had to overcome," Hound Labs CEO Mike Lynn told NBC News.

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Potential Big Business

There's a small – potentially large – business angle to the story, as well. Hound Labs hopes to have the final version of the breathalyzer on the market by the second quarter of 2018.

The potential market includes not just law enforcement agencies, who Lynn said have been lighting up the company's phones in recent weeks. Hound Labs also wants to market the product to marijuana consumers. That way, people can check their own level of impairment before getting behind the wheel.

The cost is expected to be in the $500 to $1,000 range per unit.

There's already competition. Cannabix Technologies is currently working with the Yost Research Group at the University of Florida on a "cutting edge breath detection device" to determine levels of marijuana impairment.

Of course, developing technology to determine THC levels is not the same as writing a law that states what level constitutes impairment. Lawmakers have their work cut out as

research is mixed on the issue. In some cases, no correlation has even been found between marijuana use and an increased likelihood of causing an accident.

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