

Firm in province leads science behind the smoke in medical pot testing for several big producers

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When it comes to producing pot, you really don't want to be into heavy metal.

A New Brunswick firm is leading the country in making sure that marijuana products are as pure as they can be by testing medical marijuana for heavy metals, mould, toxins, bacteria, pesticides and every other element the plant may contain.

The New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council (RPC), located in Fredericton, has been hired by roughly 18 of 35 Health Canada-approved medical marijuana producers.

The company had been testing industrial hemp since 2001 and had a federal licence to possess cannabis.

In 2014, many of the country's licensed medical marijuana growers started asking for product testing to prove to buyers that their pot has accurate THC levels and that it's contaminant-free.

"There's been some talk that the medical marijuana's expensive but that's part of the value that you get. The product is tested to verify that it's safe. Whereas if you buy from illegal sources, you don't have the comfort level. You don't know what's in it," said RPC's CEO Eric Cook.

Until 2014 testing methods for pot purity were largely unknown. Bruce Phillips, RPC's department head of the research company's organic analytical services, and a colleague, developed the company's testing methods which are closely guarded.

There's high security when it comes to testing medical marijuana. It arrives daily through Canada Post shipments. It's then taken to several secure labs within the facility.

Much of what arrives are bunches of dried marijuana buds that come in 50-gram samples. Using a grinder, lab technicians grind it into a fine powder which is carefully weighed and measured. Every gram of weed must be accounted for. Health Canada is paying close attention.

Testing for THC levels must be accurate each time.

Within a week, the lab test results are ready to hand back to clients.

Typically, after the testing is done, a small amount of marijuana power and waste, such as stems, are left over. All of it is weighed and documented before it's sent for disposal, Phillips said. Under strict supervision, it's sent to the experimental farm in Lincoln where it's incinerated, he said.

It burns so hot that anyone downwind of the incineration facility doesn't have to be concerned about getting high on the vapours, Phillips said.

With the demand for medical marijuana product testing increasing, so have the company's sales revenues. RPC has hired six additional staff members to do this work since 2014 and it's anticipating more employment opportunities in the near future.

And, when recreational marijuana is legalized, which could happen by April of 2017, the company wants to acquire an even greater market share, Cook

said.

“Hopefully that will translate into more people hired, more equipment and increasing the size of our facilities,” he said.

Other product-testing companies in the country are jockeying for position in the emerging industry.

“It’s up for grabs and time will tell who emerges as the leader but I think we have the ingredients here to be the leader,” Cook said.

Looking ahead, Phillips said, he envisions food-grade marijuana testing on products such as oils and compound butters made by New Brunswick-based companies and others across the country.

Also, he said, the company may get involved in testing for the effectiveness of medical marijuana for various health issues.

“There’s just not good data available because up until two years ago, it wasn’t a legal product,” Cook said.



Many of Canada's medical marijuana producers are sending samples of their product for testing at the New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council. Lab technician Candice Inman is separating pot buds from stems before it's ground into a powder as part of the testing procedure. Photo: Laverne Stewart/the Daily Gleaner



Many of Canada's medical marijuana producers are sending samples of their product for testing at the New Brunswick Research and Productivity Council (RPC) in Fredericton. Photo: Laverne Stewart/the Daily Gleaner