

# Provincial test labs ride high on cannabis

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Eric Cook PHOTO: JOHN CHILIBECK/LEGISLATURE BUREAU

FREDERICTON • A provincial research firm is riding high on a recent hiring binge, adding about 50 positions in less than two years, the most in its history.

And it's all thanks to pot.

RPC, or the Research and Productivity Council, a nonprofit Crown corporation whose sprawling, redbrick facilities are just up the hill from the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, has become Canada's leading laboratory for testing cannabis products, with about 30 licensed producers hiring its services.

"I can envision cannabis being added to a whole host of consumer products. Think maple syrup with cannabis," said CEO Eric Cook, showing a photograph to a reporter that his friend took of a storefront window in the Czech Republic with all sorts of colourfully packaged edible and drinkable products laced with marijuana.

"This is the way the world is going."

The rush to supply the market with legalized medicinal and recreational marijuana products has been a boon for RPC, an organization that offers a wide range of scientific and research services to more than 1,000 customers in 30 different countries.

RPC's complement of about 140 permanent and contract employees, Cook believes, is the highest it's ever been since opening the doors in 1962.

And he's not shy to say the change has largely been thanks to the legal marijuana market.

Alongside the pens, rulers, toques and daytimers RPC gives away to clients and visitors, the organization is dreaming up ways to associate its brand with bud.

"Here's a new T-shirt we've come up with," Cook says, showing a conceptual drawing of a black T-shirt with the words RPC and marijuana leaf emblazoned on it, with some scientific explanations beside it that distinguishes the clothing from the cheap kind of item you'd find in a head shop.

Most of the new hires at RPC are lab technicians who help handle the marijuana that provides a distinctive aroma to areas of the facility that at one time would have been completely out of place.

RPC got a jump on other Canadian labs because it first began testing hemp products in the late 1990s.

Industrial hemp is derived from cannabis plants with low levels of THC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, the mind-bending chemical that gives marijuana users a distinct high.

RPC was hired by textile companies and other hemp manufacturers to prove the THC levels were low enough to abide by Health Canada regulations.

This put the organization in a commanding position when Ottawa liberalized the rules around medicinal marijuana in 2014, opening the door to mass production. Its other competitors in the cannabis testing market are mostly in British Columbia, with one in Ontario, but none have as big a share.

And the rush is only going to get busier with the Trudeau Liberal government in Ottawa promising to legalize recreational marijuana this summer.

“Fortunately, we had some bright scientists who recognized the opportunity and encouraged us to pursue that,” Cook said. “We were one of the first labs out of the gates to offer testing services.”

RPC offers two kinds of services - business-led research that includes helping companies come up with new machines and the like, and analytical and testing services.

It no longer receives provincial government funding, instead selling services to businesses and other organizations, based on a cost-recovery model. Its clients and contracts are confidential.

RPC makes most of its money from lab tests, on everything from milk to air quality samples, to paternity tests, Cook said. Scientists at the facility also run tests for the coroner’s office and the provincial Department of Energy and Resource Development when wildlife suspected of being poached is brought in.

But cannabis testing is gobbling up a bigger and bigger share of lab space. RPC bills itself in promotional materials as providing “clients with timely data of the highest quality, backed up by a fully development quality management system and quality assurance plan.”

The techs with blue plastic gloves and white lab coats test for impurities such as pesticides that can become toxic when combusted in a cigarette or pipe. They also look at THC levels and other components to make sure the cannabis products are safe from mould, heavy metals, solvents and other impurities.

The impact of marijuana is everywhere - more cameras for security, much more space under renovation and, of course, more plastic baggies full of weed.

Opportunities New Brunswick predicts that within five years, up to 3,000 people will be working in the legalized cannabis industry in the province.