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Canadian firms at forefront of drunk driving prevention

Products vie for piece of auto market

THE CANADIAN PRESS

As the push for new drunk driving detection technology moves ahead, two products are vying to become the latest Canadian inventions to break into the international market.

Last Monday, Alcohol Countermeasure Systems Corp. announced that it has signed a deal with Volvo allowing its Alcolock breathalyser system to be installed into the company's trucks.

That follows reports earlier this month that Toyota Motor Corp. is backing the development of a steering wheel that does away with the breathalyser concept and uses sensors to detect intoxicated drivers. The company has refused to confirm those claims.

Drunk driving detection has become an increasingly prevalent issue for car manufacturers as advocacy groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving have stepped up the campaign to use new technologies.

According to MADD, 3,013 people were killed in motor vehicle accidents in 2004, with at least 1,157 related to impaired driving.

While both use different methods to stop drunken drivers, the Canadian-developed systems have captured the attention of major manufacturers.

Alcohol Countermeasure Systems, based in the Toronto area, said its technology will roll out first in Sweden later this year, with plans to expand the product's installation in vehicles in Denmark, Norway and Finland.

In a separate arrangement, the company is providing a detection system for Volvo cars, which are manufactured by Ford Motor Co. The company said the product will be installed in cars sold in Sweden starting next year. The first order will be for between 2,000 and 5,000 systems.

Sweden is known for its strict drunk driving laws and the government has been pushing for all vehicles to have detection systems installed by 2012.

Ian Marples, general counsel for ACS, said the market for this technology is heating up for businesses in North America.

"As the market opportunity presents itself, it'll become increasingly competitive in Europe as well," he said.

With new technologies in development, the race to advance detection systems is well underway.

Inventor Dennis Bellehumeur, a 56-year-old Windsor, Ont. resident, has been developing his own patented technology to stop drunk drivers while they're behind the wheel.

Skin sensors located on the steering wheel identify intoxicated drivers by the high level of alcohol their bloodstream. If they don't pass the test, the car doesn't start.

The system is designed to compete directly with the breathalyser system.

Developer KS Centoco Wheel Corp., a major steering wheel manufacturer located in Tilbury, Ont., near Windsor, is testing the technology.

A similar technology using a different form of sensor is being developed by Transbiotec, a private California-based company.

Reports have said Toyota is looking into the sensor system as well, though the company would only confirm in a statement that it is "seriously studying" breathalyser tests and that it considers it "effective" to look at other technologies.

Bellehumeur said his product prevents drunk drivers from getting around the system because the sensors are on the wheel of the car. He also said it removes the stigma associated with the breath detector.

