Mobile Phone Dead? Take a Hike to Recharge

- Bionic Power supplying Marines with some test equipment
- Consumer products could go to market in two or three years

By Cameron Leuthy

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Catching Pokemon could soon charge your phone, rather than wearing down the battery, thanks to equipment being tested by the Marines.

As reported by the Marine Corps Times, troops at Camp Pendleton, California, are testing the use of leg straps that convert energy from physical activity such as walking or climbing into electricity to charge electronic gear. The Marine Corps Warfighting Lab is directing the tests to determine if the system can reduce the need for soldiers to carry as much as 20 pounds of batteries on a 72-hour mission.

One version of the exoskeleton might soon let consumers charge laptops and cell phones by taking a hike, according to a spokesman for Bionic Power Inc., a company that supplied the Marines with some of the equipment now being tested.

The consumer version may be available in two to three years at about $200 to $300, Bionic Power’s Rob Nathan told Bloomberg Government. To make it more affordable and practical for non-military users, the company is aiming to reduce the weight and the power output. The military version produces 10-12 watts.

The consumer version will initially be intended for emergency responders, scientists and others who do field work and for people in developing countries who lack access to a reliable power source, Nathan said. The company’s website says when a hurricane or earthquake hits, rescue workers rely on battery powered radios and GPS to do their jobs. Batteries wear out and replacements have to be delivered -- sometimes with great difficulty.

Potential customers include anyone whose gear is mobile and uses a lot of battery power, such as players of the Pokemon Go app.

The Bionic Power product is one of several energy-producing options the Marines are testing, including portable solar panels and thin, flexible lithium-ion batteries.

(Cameron Leuthy is the senior budget analyst with Bloomberg Government.)

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