



German arms maker Armatix to release second smart gun in U.S.

Lucas Mearian

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German firearms manufacturer Armatix LLC is planning to release its second smart gun in the U.S. next year after sales of its first model -- the .22 caliber iP1 -- were quashed by pressure from some gun owners and gun rights advocates who saw it as a threat to Second Amendment freedoms.

Unlike the iP1, which used RFID technology, the new iP9 9mm semi-automatic pistol will have a fingerprint reader. The iP9 will be available in mid-2017, according to Wolfgang Tweraser, CEO and president of Armatix LLC.

The iP9 is expected to retail for about the same suggested retail price as the iP1 -- \$1,365, which is more than twice the price of many conventional 9mm semi-automatic pistols. While smart gun technology will always bring with it a price premium, Tweraser said that's to be expected, and he compared it to a Tesla electric car.

"Always the latest technology comes with a higher price tag. As you make hundreds and thousands of units, then the price will change also," Tweraser said. "We're not going to replace regular guns because of the price point also."

Tweraser said he is in the process of establishing sales staff in several states, beginning with Florida, where his U.S. operations is based. The gun will be manufactured exclusively in Germany.

Several large U.S. retail stores have already met with Armatix and, according to Tweraser, "not one of them" expressed any concern about the weapon's price. The company has also been meeting with police departments, which it sees as a key demographic for the smart gun.

Tweraser declined to release any details about the iP9's design or the technology behind it, saying only that the company is still making "final adjustments to it."

"It's going to be a very good looking gun, a very cool design," he said.

Prior to the release of the iP9, Armatix also plans to re-release its iP1 .22 caliber smart gun, though sales this time around will be focused on shooting ranges, where safety. The company plans to combine the iP1 with a new Target Response System it developed; that RFID-based system enables the gun to fire when it's pointed at a target.

"There are 18,000 gun ranges in the U.S. You can imagine that's going to keep us busy with our Target Response System. Retailers are interested in stocking it," Tweraser said.

As a .22 caliber weapon, meaning the diameter of the bullet is less than a quarter of an inch, the iP1 was more of a practice weapon, Tweraser said, and wasn't intended to be used for self-defense. In 2014, its U.S. launch, however, stirred a visceral reaction from consumers and gun rights groups.

After debuting in one of California's largest gun stores, the iP1 was quickly pulled from the shelves after some gun advocates pressured the store to stop selling it.

Engage Armament, a Maryland gun store, also announced it would sell the iP1, but reneged after gun-rights advocates lashed out on social media, called the store and even threatened its owner.

The iP1 uses an RFID chip inside a black wristwatch -- the iW1 -- which enables the iP1 pistol. In order for the handgun to function, the matching watch must be within 10-inches. The pistol can also be disabled with a timer or a PIN code entered into the iW1 watch. When the wristwatch is within 10-inches, a green LED light on the gun's grip indicates it is enabled. When not, the light turns red, indicating the weapon is disabled.

Gun advocacy groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSA) have said they do not oppose smart gun technology -- only smart gun mandates from the government.

Last year, however, an article in Guns & Gear claimed it had tested the iP1 with NRA gun experts and found it to be sorely lacking in reliability, stating that it failed after nine shots and the watch struggled to pair with the weapon.

Tweraser said the iP1 passed every weapons test by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms when it was cleared for import three years ago. In three years of testing since then, Tweraser said, there has not been a single failure in the technology.

"There's always going to be push back with new items. With the right education and explanation -- that we're not here to replace conventional guns -- I expect much less to none this time," Tweraser said. "Even if you look at the latest statements from the NRA, they say, 'We have nothing against smart guns, we just don't want the government making the decision for us.' I agree with them."

Tweraser said the socio/political problems with the iP1 started with a U.S. salesperson (whom he declined to name) who was not familiar enough with the weapon to properly explain its use to the marketplace and to emphasize that it was never meant to replace conventional weapons.

This time around, Tweraser said he's taking more time to properly educate sales staff, the public and politicians.

"When Tesla came on the market, I never heard them say, 'Let's replace the BMWs and Mercedes and only have electric cars,'" Tweraser said. "They offered a superior product that was more expensive and people said... 'Yes, it's more expensive, but I would like to have it.'"

"All the other car makers didn't become only electric car manufacturers, but they did look at how they could get greener," he continued. "So it's a win-win situation for the consumer and the environment at the same time. We should take the same approach with smart guns."

Other smart gun innovators agree that mandates are a bad idea and consumers should be allowed to choose whether they want the technology.

Many smart gun innovators and gun rights advocates have pointed to one piece of legislation in particular that sparked the anti-smart gun firestorm. In 2002, the so-called New Jersey Smart Gun Law, authored by State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen), required every firearms dealer to sell only smart guns, starting three years after they were available on the market.

"It was the classic example of government overstepping its boundaries, thinking it's smarter than the people -- and it had the opposite effect of what it was supposed to do," said Jonathan Mossberg, who founded iGun Technology Corp. and created its iGun smart gun. "These things have a way of backfiring."

Mossberg, who previously worked at O.F. Mossberg & Sons in North Haven, Conn. -- the company was founded in 1919 by his great-grandfather Oscar -- said Weinberg believed she knew more about smart guns than those making them.

"I just went bird hunting in Vermont. I don't need a smart gun to go bird hunting," Mossberg said, explaining that smart gun technology does not fit every need.

According to David Kopel, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, New Jersey's mandate may have been intended to create a market for smart guns. But as soon as just one is sold, it would trigger a ban on all traditional firearms. "So who would want to sell a smart gun knowing that, by doing so, they'd be imposing a handgun ban on New Jersey?" he told NPR in a June 2014 interview.

In 2014 and 2015, Weinberg said she would repeal the Smart Gun Law if, after doing so, the NRA would agree not to impede smart gun development and sales. According to a spokesperson for Weinberg, the NRA never responded to her offer.

This year, she sponsored another bill (S816) passed by the House and Senate that would have repealed and replaced the Smart Gun Law with a watered-down mandate requiring gun stores to carry at least one smart gun model. On Sept. 8, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie conditionally

vetoed S816, saying he would support the legislation only if it also relaxed laws on who can carry a handgun.

New Jersey is not alone in its smart-gun legislative efforts. In 2013 and 2014, Massachusetts legislators introduced the Handgun Trigger Safety Act, which also would have required all handguns manufactured, sold or imported into the U.S. to incorporate smart-gun technology within three years of the law being enacted. The law did not pass.

"The problem is laws are made by politicians and lawyers, not getting the people involved who had something to do with inventing the technology," Tweraser said. "They word in such a way making it nearly impossible for a smart gun industry to be established, because the entire gun manufacturing industry will be against it if they don't want to jump on the smart gun train."

Tweraser said if his company were looking to replace conventional weapons, it would not be manufacturing smart gun locks for them.

Armatix recently began marketing a mechanical blocking device that disables a gun and works with almost all conventional handguns, revolvers and rifles. Its Quicklock comes in varying sizes that correspond to a gun's caliber and inserts into the barrel of the gun. There it exerts slight pressure to automatically block the weapon without any further action needed in the cartridge chamber. Quicklock consists of two components: a mechatronic blocking device and a digital key.

To release the Quicklock, a link is established between the digital key and the blocking device. After authorization using a PIN code or fingerprint, the digital key transmits the release data to the blocking device, which unlocks in a fraction of a second and can be removed from the barrel.

"Glock and Smith & Wesson are good companies and of course they don't want to lose their market share," Tweraser said. "Our iP1 and the next one -- the iP9 -- are new technology with a lot of safety features meant to protect gun owners, gun users, children, teenagers, etc. We are not here to replace [conventional guns]. If people would take that approach, there would be far fewer political issues."