

Inside

- Goldschmidt confrontation, Page 3
- Civil War wrap up, Page 8
- Arizona sweep, Page 10

Oregon Daily Emerald

Monday, November 23, 1987

Eugene, Oregon

Volume 89, Number 58

A mess nobody knows how to clean up

*What to do after the bust?
Old meth labs leave behind
pollution and health problems.*

By John Haakanson
Emerald Contributor

Fists, knives, bullets and high-speed car chases are hazards police officers expect with their jobs.

Now there is a new and often invisible threat to police in Oregon, and the injuries may develop over months and years instead of occurring in a few violent seconds.

Toxic and hazardous wastes seized from illegal methamphetamine labs have police worried about the health and safety of officers involved in busting labs. But the problem doesn't stop there.

Removing hazardous, unknown mixtures of chemicals from these labs is costly and complicated. As well, the homes or motel rooms converted into labs may become uninhabitable property.

Methamphetamine manufacturers, or "cooks," generally are not trained chemists. They combine chemicals in unstable and undefinable proportions in an attempt to make products with a stronger kick. Handling these by-products can be extremely dangerous.

Apparently, relief is nowhere in sight. In fact, prison overcrowding and formerly lax regulations monitoring the sale of off-the-shelf chemicals used in manufacturing methamphetamines have made Oregon a mecca for what officials hope doesn't turn into a growth industry.

According to police reports, 104 labs were dismantled statewide in 1986. Lt. Dennis O'Donnell, narcotics unit coordinator for the Oregon State Police, said more than 100 labs already have been taken down in 1987.

In 1986, Oregon ranked third in the nation after California and Texas in the number of labs busted per state. That same year, Lane County ranked number one nationally in terms of the number of lab raids per capita by county, O'Donnell said.

Officers raiding labs find laboratory equipment and potentially toxic mixtures of chemicals used to produce the powder known on the streets as meth, crystal or speed.

Ingesting or injecting meth produces a temporary euphoria. Police say prolonged use can lead to paranoid and violent behavior.

Possession of some of the chemicals involved, including phenylacetic acid, anthranilic acid, methamphetamine and ephedrine, recently has been declared illegal without authorization, a fact police think will make it tougher for meth cooks to operate in Oregon.

Many chemicals still are available legally, however. New Oregon laws require retailers to record and report purchases of chemicals commonly used in meth production. Cooks get around this by purchasing chemicals in Washington where sales are not yet regulated, according to Mike Eyer, senior environmental analyst for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Ken Kaufmann, an environmental specialist with the Oregon State Health Division, said there are more than 50 known starter compounds that can be used to make methamphetamine, and most are hazardous in the short run and carcinogenic in the long run.

"We've got unidentifiable mixtures and sludges. When you have a synthesis of these compounds going, you ask, 'What do we test for, how do we test, and how do we dispose?'" Kaufmann said.

"The issues are impossible to pin down, and the answer is we're not sure," he added.

Eyer said the DEQ faces unique problems when trying to assess risks posed by the labs.

"The main difference is we usually have a known material, like spilled diesel, or emission with known requirements," Eyer said. "Here we literally cannot identify what they (cooks) are making."



Toxic troubles

In a secret Eugene warehouse workers with Crosby and Overton Environmental Management, Inc., of Portland, (above, left) test, label and package for disposal a variety of unknown,

hazardous chemicals that Eugene police confiscated after busting area meth labs. Most of the chemicals seized (right) will be shipped for disposal in a California landfill.

Photos courtesy of Eugene Police Department

State and local police are hoping safety issues will be clarified in the months ahead. In the meantime, officers who have raided labs without wearing protective gear have reported experiencing headaches, nausea and diarrhea.

Eugene police Sgt. Rick Siel, who has been dismantling meth labs since 1983, said officers who report short-term symptoms after busts could also be subject to long-term health problems.

"Literally, you've been poisoned," Siel said, adding it's difficult to define exactly what precautions police should take when raiding the labs.

"Safe is a relative word. We don't know what is unsafe," Siel said. "We do know what a lot of chemicals in pure form do to the body, but once you combine these things, what happens?"

Eyer said the DEQ has no scientific studies of officers who handled meth chemicals during the years before wearing safety equipment on drug raids became mandatory.

But he added that agencies fear those officers unknowingly may have risked exposure to cancer or leukemia while doing their jobs. The Oregon State Health Division's Hazardous Chemical Guidelines describes in detail the chemicals officers may encounter.

A pamphlet on these guidelines cites 10 chemicals, including Benzene, Chloroform and Lead Acetate, that are known or suspected carcinogens and are potentially hazardous to reproductive health.

Don Pizzo of the Portland Fire Bureau's hazardous materials unit said the potential risks are so great that Portland police are reluctant to enter labs.

Narcotics units want to wait until new safety eu-

quipment arrives, including lightweight oxygen tanks and protective masks with speaker capabilities, Pizzo said.

Safety equipment such as disposable hazardous materials suits and safety boots and gloves will help in the future, believes Siel, who is now conducting safety training seminars at police agencies around the state.

Siel said he wishes he had known about the potential hazards when he began working with meth labs several years ago. But he doesn't let the possibility of developing health hazards in the future bother him.

"It's a wait-and-see game," Siel said. "I'm not real pleased about it, but here I am and it's a little late to complain. Time will tell."

Police are increasingly cautious about arresting meth cooks, who may be highly contaminated, said Mike Hansen, Marion County assistant legal counsel, in reference to recent incidents in the Portland area.

For instance, in Vancouver, Wash., police ordered a suspect to strip and proceeded to douse him with water from a fire hose before arresting him. Portland police recently ticketed a suspect whose clothes appeared to be contaminated. Officers did not want the man inside a police vehicle.

"How do you treat the bodies that are so highly contaminated?" Hansen asked. "How do you handle taking people in to your facility?"

Portland Police Bureau Public Information Officer David Simpson said health concerns are important, but jail overcrowding also forces officers to issue tickets rather than take in suspects.

Because of the lack of jail space, "We see the same cooks again and again, and they come out of jail better

Turn to Meth, Page 5