BEWARE OF ILLEGAL DRUG (METHAMPHETAMINE) LABS

Timber Security: Illegal substances

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INTRODUCTION: Discoveries of illicit drug labs have increased in some parts of the country. For example, virtually no labs were discovered or seized in the Midwest and central Appalachian states in the mid-1990s, but in 2003 several thousand were seized. Like marijuana patches, these drug labs endanger anyone who discovers them. Seeking the cover of deep woods, drug producers can quickly set up these labs to create methamphetamine, a powerful, addictive stimulant that can cause violent or paranoid behavior. Labs usually produce five pounds or more of this chemical per batch, worth thousands of dollars.

Known as “meth,” “crank,” or “speed,” the drug is produced and refined in a series of fairly simple and fast manufacturing steps, using chemicals that are readily available and inexpensive. The chemicals used in making methamphetamine, and the process’s byproducts, are highly toxic. This fact means increased danger for forest industry workers who may accidentally discover them.

SECURITY BREACH / DAMAGE: Meth labs may be set up in many kinds of sheltering structures—old cabins, barns, outbuildings, chicken houses, trailers, buses. Drug cooking equipment typically consists of glass bottles, tubes, and a gas burner fueled by a propane tank. These drug labs should be considered extremely dangerous, since they can be violent. But another danger is the waste material left behind once a lab has been dismantled. Meth manufacturers simply discard toxic chemical containers and dump plastic bags of waste materials such as sulfuric acid, lead acetate, and lithium aluminum hydride—a chemical so dangerous that even the moisture on a person’s hands can cause it to explode.

Be aware of the following indicators of possible drug labs in operation:

• “Posted” or “No Trespassing” signs on land that should not be posted.
• Travel trailers, tents, or small mobile homes in out-of-the-way locations.
• An unusual amount of vehicle traffic, especially at night, in an area.
• Signs that people are frequently visiting an unusual area.
• Distinctive, obnoxious odor.
• Trash in the surrounding area—plastic garbage bags, plastic or glass bottles (clear or brown), 20- or 30-gallon drums, boxes, and cardboard cylinders with metal ends and a large plug for access.

Chemicals Associated with Meth Labs
Pseudoephedrine (cold tablets)
Ephedrine (cold tablets)
Red Phosphorus (Matches/road flares)
Lithium (Batteries)
Alcohol (Isopropyl or rubbing)
Toluene (Brake cleaner)
Ether (Engine starter)
Sulfuric Acid (Drain cleaner)
Salt (Table/rock)
Iodine (liquid or flakes/crystal)  
Trichloroethane (Gun scrubber)  
MSM (Cutting agent)  
Sodium Metal  
Methanol/Alcohol (Gasoline Additives)  
Muriatic Acid  
Anhydrous Ammonia (Farm fertilizer)  
Acetone  
Kitty Litter  
Blenders  
Rubber Tubing/gloves  
Pails/buckets  
Gas cans  
Tape/clamps  
Internet documents/notes  
“How to Make Methamphetamine” books  
Aluminum foil  
Propane cylinder (20-pound)  
Hotplates  
Plastic storage containers/ice chests  

Equipment Associated with Meth Labs  
Pyrex dishes  
Measuring cups  
Laboratory beakers/glassware/mason jars  
Jugs/bottles  
Coffee filters, strainers, paper towels, cheesecloth, towels/bedsheets (for filtering)  
Thermometer  
Funnels  
Drano/Red Devil lye (sulfuric acid), iodine tincture bottles, hydrogen peroxide bottles, and numerous acids.

Another common meth cooking method uses a combination of anhydrous ammonia and lithium batteries. Anhydrous ammonia is commonly used as a farm fertilizer, and the cooks will place the ammonia in 20-pound propane tanks that are used for gas grills. Anhydrous ammonia reacts with the brass fitting on the propane tanks and will turn that fitting blue. (Watch for this indicator.) The lithium is typically obtained from camera batteries. The cook will break the batteries open and remove the small strip of lithium inside. The last step in the cooking process usually involves the use of homemade acid gas generators. These are often made by using one-gallon gas cans or 2-liter soda bottles with plastic tubing/hosing taped to the opening. These homemade gas generators are very dangerous and can let off gas for long periods of time.

ACTIONS TAKEN: Drug Enforcement agents advise extreme caution when approaching old cabins in the woods or trailers parked along forest roads, since these structures may house meth labs. Don’t risk a confrontation with a drug manufacturer. Remember that drug labs can explode at any time if an error is made in the mixing or the cooking. Leave immediately if any suspicious operation or waste material is discovered in the woods. Do not investigate or touch the waste containers; report your discovery to your supervisor or woodland manager and, if it is your responsibility, to your state’s narcotics agency or the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

COMMENT: Although drug labs primarily threaten the safety of persons who discover them, they pose yet another problem for the forest products industry: disposal of waste. Landowners may be legally responsible for disposing of hazardous material found on their land, and disposing of it acceptably can be both expensive and time-consuming. Fortunately, the DEA currently is taking responsibility for meth lab cleanup and associated costs in most cases.

(Note: This Security Alert is an update of 92-Q-4, originally published by FRA in 1992.)

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