INTRODUCTION: Clandestine laboratories known to produce methamphetamine (Meth), as well as other illegal drugs are becoming an increasing threat to the public and employees of timberland organizations. Methamphetamine labs are the most prominent type of clandestine labs being found. Many labs are set up in rural environments, and meth lab wastes are commonly found dumped on isolated public and timber industry lands throughout the South. Oftentimes, the visiting public and employees are unaware that these dump sites are actually hazardous waste sites. It is, therefore, extremely important that we educate the public and our employees on what to look for, what to avoid, and what to do.

SECURITY BREACH/DAMAGE: The U.S. Forest Service formally instructed our employees to assist in enforcement efforts by digging through dumpsites looking for names to identify potential dumping violators. This philosophy changed overnight after law enforcement personnel became aware of the dangers associated with meth lab dumpsites. Meth labs have been found in the backs of cars, trucks, campers, hotel rooms, caves, and campgrounds. It is not uncommon to find them stored in coolers, plastic storage boxes, and duffle bags hidden in remote forested areas. The most common danger associated with methamphetamine is the human element. The “cooks” that manufacture meth are generally armed, and their behavior is often paranoid and unpredictable. Their labs are often booby trapped or guarded.

Other dangers involve the chemicals and materials used in the processing of meth. They can cause oxygen deprivation and produce combustible gasses and chemical volatility when found in poorly ventilated conditions. Producers of meth will often store anhydrous ammonia in unapproved propane bottles, which can become extremely volatile once the chemicals eat away at the brass fittings. You can spot this danger by recognizing that anhydrous ammonia will turn the brass fittings into a bluish green color.

Lastly, these types of materials pose significant health risks to persons coming into contact with them. Improper handling can result in exposure and contamination to the person exposed and everyone he or she comes into contact with, including loved ones.

RECOGNITION: Awareness and recognition are the best tools available for all of us to ensure the safety of others and ourselves. It was extremely important to the U.S. Forest Service that all field employees know what to look for, what to avoid, and what to do if they encounter meth lab hazards. The policy of
instructing employees to dig through dump sites for evidence is no longer practiced. The best way to educate employees is to take the time to show them what these hazards look like and to explain why they are dangerous and what they should do if they find a meth lab or dumpsite.

**ACTIONS TAKEN:** The U.S. Forest Service in most Southern states either has trained law enforcement officers who actively work meth lab investigations or has identified local authorities with this knowledge and expertise. These officers have prepared awareness and recognition programs and hands-on demonstrations to educate all field employees and members of the public. Brochures are distributed to aid the employee or visitor in quickly identifying items commonly found at a meth lab dumpsite. The value of this awareness training not only lies in providing the training but in uncovering a wealth of information on where lab dumpsites and meth labs are located in the local area.

**COMMENTS:** Officers who give this awareness training have advised that the employee/visitor reaction and response is immediate. They are often approached after their presentations and advised on locations where trainees have personally seen meth dumps or meth lab activity. Oftentimes employees did not know they had seen a hazardous site, but they recognized that the activity or dumpsites were highly unusual. The initial response after one awareness program conducted on the Ouachita National Forest in Oklahoma resulted in the identification and arrest of two individuals within a few days of the training session. The response to these awareness programs has been so positive and rewarding that many other agencies, clubs, and organizations have asked for similar presentations.

Many hazardous dumpsites and lab sites have been identified and cleaned up because of this awareness training. It is also important to recognize that you should never remove any of these items and take them to show someone. Once you do that, the hazardous site clean-up costs may become the responsibility of your agency or company.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Identify a local source (usually a drug task force enforcement officer) and ask them to conduct a meth lab awareness session with your employees. Ask the officer to bring items that are commonly found in meth dumps or meth labs to show your employees. Most officers or agencies will have a prepared program if this type of drug activity is common to the area. Ask them to bring brochures to pass out to your employees. The awareness training should only take approximately one hour to present, and its benefits in employee safety and reduction of a serious health risk to the community make this effort extremely worthwhile.

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**FRA STAFF COMMENT:** A related Security Alert, 04-Q-1, “Beware of Illegal Drug (Methamphetamine) Labs,” contains a list of equipment and chemicals commonly associated with meth production. Members may view this publication at www.forestresources.org/members/serpub/04-Q-1.html.

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