Meth Lab Busts Continue To Rise In Missouri

JIM SALTER Associated Press Writer - June 3, 2009
ST. LOUIS (AP) — Despite a law making it harder to buy ingredients to make methamphetamine, lab busts are on the rise in Missouri. Meanwhile, the state continues to lead the nation in meth incidents, and by a wide margin.

Missouri State Highway Patrol Capt. Tim Hull said Wednesday that 462 lab busts and discoveries of meth-processing dump sites were reported in Missouri for the first three months of 2009, according to an internal report. That was up from 426 incidents in the first quarter of 2008.

No other state was even close. Mississippi had the second-highest number of meth incidents, with 146 in the January-through-March period. Michigan was third with 136.

Missouri has led the nation in meth lab incidents every year since 2001.

"You have to look at it two ways," Hull said. "Is the problem here that much worse, or is the concerted effort of Missouri law enforcement that much greater as far as finding it and seeking out where meth is being manufactured?"

Missouri meth labs also tend to be smaller operations, something akin to the alcohol "moonshiners" of the Prohibition era. Still, the problem remains a big concern. The toxic mix of chemicals causes serious health problems and death. Meth lab fires are common.

And every time the state seems to be making progress, the meth-makers find ways around the roadblocks.

Meth busts declined in Missouri after a 2005 law required products containing pseudoephedrine or ephedrine to be placed behind pharmacy counters, limited the amount that could be purchased, and required buyers to show photo identification.

So rather than buy large quantities at one spot, meth-makers began "pill shopping" in multiple cities or towns. The practice is known as "smurfing."

Last August, another new Missouri law restricted availability of pseudoephedrine and ephedrine even further — allowing it to be sold only in pharmacies. It helped for a while, officials said, but the numbers have gradually crept back up.

Some law enforcement agencies and the Missouri Narcotics Officers Association want lawmakers to make pseudoephedrine a Schedule 3 controlled substance, which would require a prescription to purchase it. Meth fighters also want an online system that would immediately track purchases of the meth precursors and red flag

those making multiple purchases in a short period of time.

Lawmakers have authorized the electronic monitoring system, but haven't funded it.

"At this time, we don't have a real-time solution to the problem to apprehend these people as they go from store to store to store," said Dave Marshak, a lieutenant with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department.

In some cases, pharmacists are taking matters into their own hands. Richard Logan operates L&S Discount Pharmacy in the southeast Missouri town of Charleston. Also a reserve deputy sheriff in Scott and Mississippi counties, he sometimes wears his badge and sheriff's department vest to work. And he no longer sells pseudoephedrine, except to people he knows.

But Logan said smurfing isn't the only problem. Meth manufacturers have found a faster way to make the drug, the so-called "shake-and-bake" method.

Typically, making a batch of meth could take all night. The new method involves chemicals that are shaken in a 2-liter bottle.

"Now, they can make a whole batch in about 30 minutes," Logan said.

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