

Keeping Drugs Out Of The Bakken

SHARON COHEN, AP National Writer

WILLISTON, N.D. (AP) — The blood-drenched man had survived a brutal attack: Beaten with brass knuckles, shocked with a stun gun, slashed with a razor blade, then dumped 40 miles away in Montana, he staggered to a farmhouse for help. His path eventually led authorities back to a quiet backyard in this oil boom town.

What they uncovered was a large-scale methamphetamine ring that had found a home in a state long known for its small-town solitude, its slow pace and peaceful pastures.

The members of this violent gang were all relative newcomers to Williston. They called themselves "The Family," the feds say, and were holed up in a few campers tucked behind an innocent-looking, white-frame house. They had plenty of firepower, too: One of the men had an arsenal of 22 weapons.

Authorities say several "Family" members had abducted and planned to kill one of their own, seeking to enforce their code of silence out of fear he'd spill the group's secrets. They assaulted him in a camper in Williston, stuffed him into a plastic-lined car trunk, then beat him again after he escaped. He was left for dead in a Montana field. He wound up, instead, in a North Dakota hospital, telling the FBI his story.

The result: Seven guilty pleas. Prison sentences of up to 20 years. And the dismantling of a drug trafficking ring that sold meth for more than a year in one of the fastest-growing corners of America.

The oil boom in the Bakken shale fields has touched off an explosion of growth and wealth on this remote wind-swept prairie. Big money is raining down in small towns. Oil rigs light up the night sky. But the bonanza suddenly flourishing here has also brought with it a dark side: a growing trade in meth, heroin, cocaine and marijuana, the shadow of sinister cartels and newfound violence.

Small-town police forces have been struggling to keep pace. In nearby Watford City, for instance, police calls for service have multiplied at a staggering rate — almost 100 times — in a five-year period. County jails overflow on weekend nights. Local sheriffs no longer know every name and face when they stroll down Main Street.

Drugs and dealers are popping up in all kinds of places: Heroin is being trafficked on isolated Indian reservations. Mexican cartels are slowly making inroads in small-town America. And hard-core criminals are bringing drugs in from other states, sometimes concealing them in ingenious ways: liquid meth in windshield wiper reservoirs.

"Organized drug dealers are smart," says U.S. Attorney Tim Purdon. "They're good

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businessmen. They go where the demand is and that's what we're seeing here. ... There's simply a lot of money involved, a lot of money flowing around in those communities."

With the problems becoming more pronounced, the feds are pouring in resources to bolster local police and drug task forces.

"We're battling our butts off to stay ahead of this," Purdon says. "Our concern is that this is an open market and as people start to compete, the violence will increase. ... There's nothing less at stake here than our way of life."

The oil boom with its gusher of dollars was already under way more than three years ago when Tim Purdon was sworn in as chief federal prosecutor for western North Dakota.

The Bakken Formation — tens of thousands of square miles of oil-bearing shale under the long, flat prairies of western North Dakota, eastern Montana and part of Canada — was touted as a modern-day Gold Rush. Thousands flocked here, most law-abiding Americans in search of good-paying jobs. But the lure of big money was a guaranteed draw, too, for drug dealers and other troublemakers.

As the population skyrocketed, Purdon noticed a seemingly inevitable consequence: more people, more crime.

Federal prosecutions in the western half of North Dakota nearly tripled — from 126 in 2009 to 336 last year — mostly, he says, because of drug cases involving several people.

In Montana, 70 people — about half from outside the region — have been charged since October with federal drug offenses. Last spring, about 10 others, included two reputed members of the notorious Sinaloa cartel, were accused in a drug conspiracy. The two pleaded guilty to distributing at least 80 pounds of meth to local drug dealers within a five-month period; the intended market, the feds say, was the oil patch.

The cartel members also traded meth for about 150 guns, some of which made their way to Mexico, according to authorities.

"We have a formidable opponent," says Mike Cotter, U.S. attorney in Montana. "They market it well. They move it well and it's a battle that we have to continue to fight."

It's not one that's readily visible.

Drug deals here are arranged in phone calls, behind closed doors or along back streets of once-sleepy towns now pulsating with the work of a multibillion-dollar oil

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industry. Tanker trucks rumble down the roads day and night. Recent arrivals come and go from "man camps" — rows of identical, barrack-like dorms sitting on empty fields. And cars with license plates from almost every state in the union zip in and out of crowded fast-food parking lots.

"The idea of having junkies hanging around the rigs and the fracking sites — that's not happening," says Williams County Sheriff Scott Busching.

Drugs are not new here. Years ago, homegrown meth was a scourge in North Dakota but its supply was sharply reduced by a crackdown on "mom-and-pop" meth labs and legislation that made it harder to buy ingredients.

These days, the drug trade looks a lot different.

Meth is still most common, but most of it originates in Mexico. It's more potent and is generally being found in larger quantities. (In Ward County, about two hours away, meth seizures jumped from \$63,200 in 2012 to \$404,600 last year, according to the sheriff's office.)

Heroin is more visible, something that "scares me," says Busching, who adds that he'd probably rate the drug problem in his county a 7 on a scale of 10.

Prices are up, too, fueled by demand in an area where lots of young men are flush with cash, far from their families and have little to do in their spare time. Authorities say a gram of meth that might sell for \$120 in big cities can cost \$200 in Williston. In Montana, an ounce that might have sold for \$800 in 2008 now goes for about \$2,400-\$2800.

Guns also are increasingly becoming part of the business.

"We're seeing a lot more armed drug traffickers than I've previously noticed," says Derek Hill, an ATF agent in Bismarck. "It's kind of a two-way street," he adds, with guns used as protection and for barter.

The ATF opened a bureau last year in the tiny town of Bottineau and within the first five months, the agent had opened 14 weapons cases throughout western North Dakota, many also involving drugs, says Scott Sweetow, special agent in charge in the region.

Another difference: Authorities are seeing more criminals from out of state, some with long rap sheets. One of the suspects arrested by the Bottineau agent had 15 felonies, according to the ATF.

The seven men in the 2012 abduction-drug conspiracy had all come to Williston within two years before their arrests. Brian Dahl, also known as Kodiak, had transported meth from Washington, according to documents. Though his felony record should have barred him from owning firearms, he was arrested with nine rifles, six pistols, four shotguns and three revolvers. He's awaiting sentencing.

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Jeffrey Jim Butler, also known as Pops, identified by the feds as The Family's recruiter, had an assault and drug record. He's serving a 20-year sentence after pleading guilty to kidnapping and conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine.

In another big drug bust, a 24-year-old Bakersfield, Calif., man who was jailed back home on murder, assault and gang charges was among 22 people indicted in January in "Operation Pipe Cleaner." The group is accused of trafficking heroin, crack, cocaine, marijuana and painkillers in the Dickinson area, about 100 miles from Williston.

And "Operation Winter's End"— an ongoing local, state and federal probe — also has tentacles that extend well beyond the Bakken's borders. More than 40 people have been charged with dealing heroin and meth in on and around the Fort Berthold reservation, home to the Three Affiliated Tribes. Among the accused: residents of California and Colorado alleged to have been a drug connection for local dealers.

"It used to be if someone was selling methamphetamine in the area, there probably were six degrees of separation from a Mexican cartel or a motorcycle gang," Purdon says. "Those drugs were passing through a lot of different hands before they ended up on the street. Generally, what we're seeing now is only one or two degrees."

Local police chiefs deal with the tragic results.

In New Town, a hamlet that sits on the Fort Berthold reservation, Art Walgren, police chief until recently, said he knew when a new batch of heroin arrived, because there'd be a rash of overdoses.

Like many oil patch towns, drugs are part of a larger crime wave that includes more thefts, bar fights and domestic violence. "We kind of run around plugging holes in the dikes," Walgren said, "hoping they don't break."

Federal officials — including U.S. senators from North Dakota and Montana who met in the Bakken last summer to discuss drugs — have focused new attention on the area.

The FBI — which is planning a permanent office in the region — ATF, the Drug Enforcement Administration and Bureau of Indian Affairs have added or diverted resources. Last fall, the feds and state officials in both states launched "Project Safe Bakken," a collaborative effort to pursue criminal networks, including drug dealers,

And Williams County — home to Williston — was recently designated a high-intensity drug trafficking area, paving the way for more federal dollars. Some of that aid will be used by the North Dakota attorney general's office to add a prosecutor who will specialize in drug cases, working in both state and federal courts.

Local police desperately need the help.

A North Dakota State University study released last year, called "Policing the Patch,"

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found the number of police calls for service in Williston had quadrupled from 2005 to 2011 to nearly 16,000. In Watford City — about 30 miles away — there were just 41 calls in 2006. In 2011: almost 4,000.

Nearly a third of police officers in the study said the drug problem is acute.

"I think one in every five people that I deal with has drugs on them," one unidentified officer said.

Another summed up the situation this way:

"More drugs than we have ever dealt with. ... Ninety percent of the people who come here to work in the oil fields are good people. The 10 percent of the people who work in the oil fields that are problems make it bad for the rest of them."

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Judge David Nelson sees some of those lawbreakers in his court.

A 31-year veteran of the bench, Nelson, presiding judge of the Northwest judicial district of North Dakota, says the most dramatic change in crime that has occurred is the degree of violence. "It's not just two guys duking it out and shaking hands," he says. "The knives come out. People drive cars over other people. The guns come out."

Nelson estimates more than half his cases involve newcomers.

Before the boom, he says, "I pretty much knew most of the defendants. I knew their parents, their kids, their grandparents, their next-door neighbors. Now I can go weeks and see people I've never seen before. It's amazing how many people are arrested within days of getting here."

With workers living in temporary addresses and drug dealers adept at blending in, investigators find it hard to develop the kind of who's who of local crime that other police departments have at their fingertips.

"It's like trying to capture smoke," says Bryan Lockerby, administrator of the Montana Department of Justice's Division of Criminal Investigation. "It runs the gamut from high-end cartels to street dealers. It's not like you catch one organization and it's over."

Federal agents say the same.

"I really think it's going to take us awhile to sort of determine which organizations are having the biggest influence," says J. Chris Warrener, special agent in charge of the FBI's Minneapolis division, which includes North Dakota. "It's safe to say the Mexican cartels are involved but that the drugs are not necessarily flowing straight up from Mexico."

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One thing is certain: There is a brisk narcotics trade. It continues even though most oil companies conduct drug tests, both for hiring, and later, randomly.

Patrick Johnsen has seen it firsthand.

Johnsen, 29, came to the Bakken in 2010 to escape drugs. He'd been heavy into meth and crack back home in the Chicago suburbs and decided to start over, moving to North Dakota. He arrived with a mountain of debts and \$11.72 in his pocket.

He found an oil job using engineering skills he'd acquired during college. But old habits die hard. "I was still under the mindset of 'work hard, party hard,'" Johnsen says. He was arrested for drunken driving and fired.

He turned things around, though, and has been sober since September 2012. Johnsen now works on an oil rig in Montana. He helped start a twice-weekly support group of recovering substance abusers and stays out of bars.

Johnsen says some workers use drugs, falsely believing it will "increase their endurance, their alertness. It's that hustle that goes with all drugs in terms of what you believe it'll make you do ... work harder, work stronger, work longer, when in fact, it actually makes you that much more sloppy and makes you such a safety hazard on the job."

Johnsen knows there's another kind of danger.

He's reminded of it by a photo on his cell phone of a friend who'd come to the Bakken, attended his support group and recently lost his struggle with alcohol and drugs.

"He was a young guy," he says. "There was no reason he should have died."

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Every day, Sheriff Scott Busching — a self-described "die-hard, old-school cop" — faces the ever-changing landscape that is the Bakken:

More serious traffic accidents. (He stopped riding his motorcycle, selling his Harley.)
More arrests. And a county jail filled to capacity. (The average nightly inmate population has jumped from 24 five years ago to 135.)

The veteran sheriff says he once employed a "North Dakota nice" philosophy where law enforcement tried to solve problems, whenever possible, by avoiding tickets and jailing people. Now there's no time for that.

Busching — who notes this area is in its third oil boom — compares the transformation of the Bakken to a home renovation: messy, chaotic at times. But ultimately, good.

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He celebrates the positive — the wealth of good-paying jobs, the new businesses, the promise of oil riches for years to come — that would be the envy of any community.

He acknowledges the negative, too, the drugs and everything else, but says he's tired of those who dwell on that.

Busching concedes it took time for him to accept the dramatic changes but he came around.

"I wanted my old town back, my old country back," he says. "I liked it that way. I want it to be Mayberry. But when I came to realization that it's never, ever going to be that way (I thought) ... Well, let's stick around and see if we can make it the best place possible."

It's a long-term project. Oil is expected to flow in the Bakken for another generation or more.

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