

Anhydrous Ammonia: It's Not Just Fertilizer Anymore, It's a Dangerous Ingredient in the Drug Sub-culture

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It couldn't happen here — it's just a big-city problem. Drug pushers, junkies and “meth labs” where kitchen chemists cook methamphetamines sold on the street as “crank,” “speed,” and “ice” — they're part of a distant drug culture in some remote urban slum. Right?

Guess again. Meth labs are mushrooming at an alarming rate in places you might least suspect — in the heart of farm country. Part of the reason is that an increasingly common ingredient used in making methamphetamine is readily available from many farms and cooperatives, and might easily have been stolen or illegally purchased right under your nose.

That ingredient is anhydrous ammonia. To co-op employees and producers, anhydrous ammonia, or NH_3 , is commonly used as fertilizer. To meth lab operators, it offers a means of producing a highly potent form of “speed” in one-third the normal “cook” time.

Those urban drug dealers suddenly have a lot of country cousins.

“It has become a prevalent problem, especially in recent months,” says Sondra Gonzalez, a crime analyst for the Narcotics Division of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI). “In 1995, Kansas had seven meth labs that we had identified. As of early October 1998, there were 147.”

While many of these drug houses were located in eastern Kansas on the outskirts of metropolitan Kansas City, Gonzalez notes that “it is spreading across Kansas. The rural areas give the manufacturers better places to hide and more opportunities to make meth.”

Kansas now ranks third in the nation in the number of meth labs seized by law enforcement agencies. Neighboring Missouri has achieved the dubious distinction of being the meth lab capital of the country. With a 535 percent increase in meth lab seizures in the past two years, Missouri has surpassed second-place California.

The truth is that methamphetamines can be manufactured just about anywhere from commonly available “household” goods. Lithium (from batteries), acetone (paint thinner), lantern fuel, lye and ephedrine (found in many over-

the-counter cold medicines) are among the ingredients that create a chemical that can induce a “high” lasting anywhere from eight to 72 hours.

Anhydrous ammonia, a colorless gas, figures into the equation because of its ability to hasten the drying process in methamphetamine manufacturing; meth labs using NH_3 can turn out their product in one-third the normal time.

A hazardous substance even when used with the greatest care, NH_3 is combustible and potentially explosive. In both gas and liquid form, it can cause irritation and chemical burns to the skin, eyes and respiratory tissue. High concentrations of vapor can lead to a potentially fatal buildup of fluid in the lungs.

Meth lab operators, however, have little concern for safety or legality. They typically obtain NH_3 either by theft or illegal purchase.

Says Steve Enyart, safety coordinator for Farmland’s Lawrence, Kan., Nitrogen Plant, “Meth users have tapped into rail cars carrying 158,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia. They use primitive methods of removing it, and it can bleed onto the surrounding area. The same is true of nurse tanks that farmers leave out in their fields.” With virtually no foolproof means of securing the tanks or tank valves, every farm or co-op that keeps NH_3 on premises is a potential victim of theft.

Anhydrous ammonia bandits typically siphon their booty into 20-pound propane tanks like those used for backyard barbecue grills. “These tanks could rupture or blow a valve,” cautions Enyart, adding that the valves on these small tanks are usually brass or bronze alloy, which will begin to corrode almost immediately in the presence of anhydrous ammonia.

Another concern of Enyart’s is that these unsafe containers of NH_3 are taken to meth labs that may be located in apartment complexes, abandoned farmhouses, homes and basements, campers and automobiles — placing anyone who lives nearby in serious danger.

In an effort to address the problem by creating awareness, Enyart arranged for staff members from Farmland’s Nitrogen Plant and Co-op in Lawrence to meet with Kansas Bureau of Investigation agents Sondra Gonzalez and Bruce Coffman. Gonzalez agrees with Enyart that awareness is one of the best, and at this point perhaps the only, means of prevention.

“We’ve made up signs and posters to be placed throughout the Farmland Co-op in Lawrence,” she says. The posters urge co-op employees to notify the KBI if they encounter persons attempting to purchase small quantities of anhydrous ammonia or detect any signs of tampering with co-op storage tanks. Similar

notices have been posted in major retail outlets where meth cooks might shop for other ingredients, and at hospitals that might encounter patients suffering chemical burns or other NH_3 -related symptoms.

“We know it’s a problem, and we need to work together,” Gonzalez believes. “Co-ops usually know who the farmers are in their area, and they can report anyone suspicious or unknown who purchases large quantities of anhydrous ammonia.”

“Farmland (in Lawrence) has been a big help in working with us on this problem,” she says, adding that without this kind of cooperation, “we really have no good way to prevent it.”

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