

“Idaho's meth war is shifting from homes to highways now that the drug can be made more cheaply in Mexico or border states”

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By: Kathleen Kreller

Ten years ago, Treasure Valley's battle against methamphetamine played out in neighborhoods, where "mom and pop" cooks used toxic chemicals to whip up batches of the drug, polluting every surface in homes and garages.

These days, undercover drug agents and police play a cat-and-mouse game on Idaho's highways with organized drug cartels shipping in carloads of the drug from Mexico and other states.

In 2000, Idaho police busted and cleared 186 meth labs - the most ever in a single year - primarily from Ada and Canyon counties. Numbers declined slightly over the next half decade.

But in 2004 and 2005, as federal regulations and new state rules started to limit access to pseudoephedrine-based cold pills, - a key ingredient in meth - the number of labs plummeted. There were just 14 found statewide in 2006.

Nampa police Sgt. Chris Rowe said that in the early 2000s, the department had a special trailer that was constantly in use for cleaning out the hazardous chemicals from meth labs. Rowe, who runs the department's drug unit, said he doesn't know where the trailer is now.

Clandestine labs are few and far between, he said.

"They have fallen off the charts, thank God. Making it is more trouble than it is worth - you might as well go find a meth dealer," said Lt. Jack Catlin, a detective with the Idaho State Police. "Our meth comes from Mexico or down there by the border."

Drug cartels set up "super labs" that provide a more pure supply, a cheaper product and an easier avenue to bring the drug into Idaho through border states, Catlin said.

It is telling, Catlin said, that Mexico is the world's No. 1 importer of ephedrine, the base from which meth is made.

While groups like the Idaho Meth Project target shocking ads at potential first-time users, police are working hard to limit the supply available to potential addicts. But it takes tips and even plain dumb luck to stumble across people transporting drugs into and through Idaho, Catlin said.

"It's all coming in on the roads, and we don't interdict that much that way," Catlin said. "It's easy to run dope up from California ... the amount of law enforcement we have on the interstates is minimal. It's like a normal business - you are going to take the path of least resistance to make your money."

Idaho has become an "easy distribution" site for taking meth into plains cities, like Omaha, Neb., Catlin said.

"The fight now is to try to deter and make it more difficult for these organizations to come up here and set up shop," Catlin said. "The people that really make money doing this are the higher-level traffickers. Most (lower-level) drug dealers don't make a lot of money."

On the front line of the fight are detectives trying to bust big-time networks of drug dealers. But the distribution webs are tight-knit and very hard to infiltrate, said an undercover Meridian Police Department detective who asked not to be identified to protect his undercover work.

"It's a structured business from the boss all the way down," the detective said. "Now it's controlled by Mexican cartels. Every person who is a boss for dealing has a boss out of state."

Likewise, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Idaho prosecutes big federal cases that involve larger amounts of drugs that cross state lines.

For example, on several occasions in 2007 and 2008, Raymond Herrera Luna, an Oregon man, sold large quantities of methamphetamine to investigators in Caldwell, Fruitland and Meridian. Luna is spending 12 years in federal prison for conspiracy to traffic drugs.

In August 2008, Ada County and federal officials caught two Mexican nationals transporting liquid meth in the windshield washer and radiator overflow compartments in a 1995 Honda Accord. The men were sentenced to seven years in federal prison.

But meth still lures traffickers because it is a lucrative business. A pound of methamphetamine is worth \$17,000, Catlin said. The Meridian detective priced a pound of meth closer to \$22,000.

"There is probably as much meth on the street as there ever was ... the criminals are just adapting," the detective said.

A meth-loaded car that gets stopped or a long-term undercover bust just isn't as visible as haz-mat crews cleaning out a clandestine lab, Catlin said.

"It just doesn't get the publicity," he said. "A lot of those arrests and cases are long-term. There's no press."

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