

Fresno Bee (California)

July 7, 2010 Wednesday
FINAL EDITION

**METH LABS IN DECLINE;
New law pushed some producers of drug to move from
California to Mexico.**

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SECTION: LOCAL NEWS; Pg. A1

LENGTH: 673 words

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

A dramatic decline in illegal meth labs that once made the Central Valley infamous underscores how a federal law has cut illicit production of the drug, a new report shows. But it's unclear whether the law has had any effect on meth addiction.

Since 2006, when Congress passed an anti-methamphetamine measure co-written by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., the number of meth lab cleanups nationwide has decreased significantly, auditors found. Investigators attribute the decline to the law, which made it harder to buy key chemicals used in illicit drug production.

"We're still getting super labs," Bill Ruzzamenti, director of the Central Valley **High Intensity Drug Trafficking** Area, said Tuesday. "We're just not getting as many super labs."

The federal Drug Enforcement Administration funded the cleanup of a record 11,790 methamphetamine labs in the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2005. By fiscal year 2008, the most recent year for which figures are available, the DEA funded the cleanup of 3,866 labs.

Contract improvements and other revisions also cut the average cost per lab cleanup from \$3,600 in fiscal 2007 to \$2,200 in fiscal 2009, auditors with the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General noted.

It's not clear what effect the reduction of labs has had on meth use. The federal government's most recent state-level estimates of methamphetamine use are for 2007. Methamphetamine use remains a problem in California, said Michelle Gregory, a special agent and public information officer with California's Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement.

"I don't think we've made a serious dent in the ability to get it," she said.

Only 13 of the meth labs cleaned up by the DEA in fiscal 2008 were in California, the new audit notes. Though state authorities cleaned up additional labs not counted by the DEA, law enforcement officers generally like the trend.

"Overall, we've seen a decrease [in lab seizures and cleanups] as well," said Gregory.

Ruzzamenti added that the number of meth labs seized and cleaned up in California has declined from several hundred a year to a number barely in the double digits.

With offices in Fresno and Sacramento, the Central Valley **HIDTA** helps coordinate state, local and federal anti-drug efforts in the region between Redding and Bakersfield.

When the **HIDTA** was established in 1999, California was ruefully dubbed a "source country" for its ample meth production, particularly in the Central Valley's remote rural stretches.

But in recent years, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime noted late last month, meth production moved to Mexico. The amount of methamphetamine seized near the U.S.-Mexico border nearly doubled between 2007 and 2009, the annual U.N. drug report concluded.

"DEA officials attribute the decrease in cleanups ... to the passage of the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005, which imposed significant restrictions on the sale of pseudoephedrine to methamphetamine manufacturers," inspector general auditors noted.

The law, signed by President George W. Bush in March 2006, limits the amount of pseudoephedrine that can be sold, moves products containing it behind the pharmacy counter and imposes record-keeping requirements. Common medications containing the drug include Sudafed and other decongestants.

Domestic drug gangs now resort to "smurfing," which involves frequently purchasing such medicines in quantities small enough to avoid normal restrictions. "They'll go into a homeless shelter and get a dozen people, and then bring them to every pharmacy in the county to buy cold medicine blister packs," Ruzzamenti said.

The illicit labs are not only problems for law enforcement, but for health officials as well. They generally produce toxic waste along with the methamphetamine -- toxic byproducts can burn, explode and corrode. They also can sicken law enforcement officers cleaning up the labs and seep into groundwater.

In fiscal 2008, the DEA spent about \$16.6 million on drug lab cleanups.

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GRAPHIC: THE FRESNO BEE

ILLUSTRATION - 1999; 2005; 2008 Source: Justice Department Office of Inspector General See microfilm or PDF for complete details

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper