

Agricultural Security Series Fact Sheet

Anhydrous Ammonia Theft & Methamphetamine

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Introduction

Anhydrous ammonia (NH₃) is a critical ingredient in the production of methamphetamine (meth). As a result, it is being stolen from anhydrous nurse tanks at farms and farm supply businesses. This MSU Extension Fact Sheet will provide information on how you as a farmer or agribusiness can help reduce the theft of anhydrous ammonia, while also helping to decrease the production of meth in Michigan. The fact sheet will also provide information on how to recognize a meth lab on your farm, recognize waste from a lab, and provide precautions on the hazards of handling left-over lab materials.

Methamphetamine Production & Precautions

Methamphetamine is an illegal drug that is becoming more prevalent in the United States. The Michigan State Police Methamphetamine Investigation Unit reports that the number of anhydrous ammonia thefts and meth labs seizures in Michigan has been increasing significantly since 2000. While meth is easy to make and cheap to buy, there are serious and lasting health problems for those who use it. Studies show that it is also highly addictive. Meth use causes skin sores, severe tooth decay, hair loss, depression, brain damage, psychotic behavior, and even death. Family members and children who are in homes where a meth lab is in operation are also at risk.

The process of making methamphetamines is not difficult to learn, however, the process and the ingredients are extremely dangerous. Public health groups caution both makers and users of meth about these health risks. The hazards are such that homes where labs have been found may be condemned. Clean-up crews must wear protective equipment when cleaning up a meth lab that has been closed down. Residues from labs that remain on lab equipment, walls, floors, furniture, and discarded materials include acids, caustics, solvents, and other hazardous materials. These toxins can cause burns, rashes and tissue irritation, while vapors can cause dizziness, nausea and other health effects. Because of this, individuals who might come into contact with equipment or supplies previously used by a meth producer should learn to recognize a lab or lab components and then call the appropriate authorities. Never handle materials that you suspect may have been used in the production of meth.

Recognizing a Meth Lab

Meth labs are often placed in abandoned buildings such as empty farm houses, trailers, barns and buildings, but may also be found in homes, mobile homes, and even hotel rooms. Mobile labs are also common where meth is made in the back of a van or car trunk. Because of the strong odors emitted from a lab, people who make meth often look for rural areas where the smells will go unnoticed. Signs that a meth lab is present include:

- A strong ammonia or ether smell in the structure or area of the structure, or neighbors complaining of odors
- Numerous discarded portable LP tanks nearby
- Discarded piles of coffee filters, soft drink or fruit bottles, cold medicine packages, starting fluid, drain cleaner and other materials
- Windows that are barred, covered, or otherwise fortified
- Unusual security such as cameras

- Windows open even when it is cold outside (to ventilate the room)
- Individuals leaving the building/trailer to smoke
- Suspicious people frequenting the building/trailer, especially at night
- Heavy activity of people visiting the vicinity

If you suspect a lab may be operating on your property, you should not enter the building nor confront someone you think is involved in the lab. Neither should you handle materials that you think might be left-over components of a lab. Call your local law enforcement agency to investigate. You may also call the Michigan State Police “Meth Tip Hotline” at 1-866-METH-TIP (1-866-638-4847).

Reducing Thefts of Anhydrous Ammonia and Reducing Your Liability

Following the suggestions below, you may be able to help reduce the theft of anhydrous ammonia from your farm or farm supply outlet. Under new legislation, you may also reduce your liability should a thief cause an anhydrous ammonia accident. Public Act 418 of 2006 provides protection from tort liability for sellers and end users when any 2 of the following steps are implemented:

- a. Storage in a tank that is properly equipped with a functioning tank or valve lock that is used at all times except when the seller or end user is taking anhydrous ammonia from the tank or filling the tank.
- b. Storage with a substance added to the anhydrous ammonia that is or that contains a dye that will, on release from the container that holds the anhydrous ammonia, stain objects that it comes in contact with, including skin and clothing, in a highly visible manner. The tank shall have decal stickers or other signage indicating the dye is present.
- c. Nurse tank storage with an inhibitor that will, when used in the illegal production of methamphetamine, reduce the purity or usability of the drug.
- d. Security cameras or other video surveillance equipment with recording capability that provides for the identification of trespassers and other persons on the property within the vicinity of the storage tank(s).
- e. Storage in a tank that is located within locked security fencing at all times, except when the seller or end user is taking anhydrous ammonia from the tank or filling the tank.
- f. Storage in a tank that is visible by lighting, motion detector lighting or motion detector alarms.
- g. Follow nurse tank stewardship by:
 - i. Removing tank hoses when not in use
 - ii. Parking tanks down wind of sensitive areas
 - iii. Not leaving tanks in the field overnight
 - iv. Not keeping tanks on the farm any longer than absolutely necessary

Summary

Report a theft of anhydrous in progress, and/or report suspicious persons or behavior in regard to anhydrous tanks by calling 911. Do not confront thieves yourself. Anhydrous ammonia can be hazardous to both humans and livestock, and is considered as an Extremely Hazardous Substance under SARA Title III. A release of 19 gallons or more must be immediately reported to the local emergency preparedness coordinator (listed under county government), the DEQ Pollution Emergency Alert System at 800-292-4706, and the EPA National Response Center at 800-424-8802. Refer to MSU Extension Bulletin E-2575 for more information.

Farmers and agribusiness persons should take steps to prevent anhydrous ammonia theft and learn how to recognize the signs of meth production. By securing anhydrous ammonia and reporting meth labs, farmers and agribusinesses can protect their families, farms, and businesses, while providing a service to their communities.

