

**CLANDESTINE DRUG LABS: THE PROBLEM, THE DANGERS, AND
THE FUTURE**

RECOGNITION VIDEO

**Audience: Law Enforcement, Firefighters, EMS, and Public
Health Officials.**

The program opens with dramatic music and “Cops” style shots of police officers raiding a clandestine drug lab. Suspects are brought out in handcuffs and read their rights as the narrator begins.

Narrator: They produce a product that saps the strength from a community and the will of its users. Left unchecked, need for the product surges, generating a growing, captive market.

While they produce it, they expose themselves, neighbors, and even their children to toxic chemicals and the threat of fire and explosions.

Then with production complete, they dump unwanted toxic waste along roadsides, into fields, and even into public water supplies.

“THE PROBLEM”

Dramatic music rises, then the animated title, “Clandestine Drug Labs: the Problem, the Dangers, and the Future” appears for the first time. Shots of a working metamphetamine lab and a meth lab dump site follow as the narrator continues to introduce the story.

Narrator: The manufacturing of illegal drugs in The US, particularly methamphetamine, has taken on epidemic proportions. These illicit operations, known as “clandestine laboratories,” confront responders with a new set of challenges.

The operators of the labs, known as “cooks,” are driven by the lure of easy money and the grasp of a drug that through a new manufacturing process, is twice as potent, and provides a longer lasting high than cocaine.

Apprehending and prosecuting clandestine lab “cooks” is only part of the battle. What’s usually left behind is a makeshift laboratory overflowing with hazardous chemicals and contaminated equipment. And chances are that hazardous wastes generated during the cook have also been illegally dumped nearby.

A shot of law enforcement officers inventorying a confiscated quantity of methamphetamine appears. The lead officer, Special Agent Supervisor Greg McClung, of California's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement is then introduced and describes the meth problem in his state. The narrator then continues with more background on the problem as more footage of clandestine labs is screened.

Greg McClung: Methamphetamine, which is a primary drug that we are seeing manufactured in California, is the drug of the '90s. We've seen a tremendous increase in the past 5 years in the amount of methamphetamine labs that we're seizing in the Southern California area, specifically centered out of Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernadino Counties. They're mixing anything and everything to try to produce a finished product that they can inject and/or sell to make somewhat or a little bit of a profit so they can in turn, manufacture another ounce or two.

Narrator: Methamphetamine, also known as "speed", "crank", "crystal", and "ice" can be ingested orally, snorted, injected, or smoked by users. Long term abusers, known as tweekers, often binge for up to two weeks and constantly crave more of the drug to recreate the euphoric state brought on from the initial high.

Narrator: Chronic abusers become delusional, experience hallucinations and exhibit high risk behavior often resulting in violence. Extreme weight loss, pale facial skin, discolored teeth and scars or open sores are also common.

With only a modest investment, any methamphetamine user can become a meth “cook” in a matter of hours. The recipe to produce the drug can be found on the internet and most of the ingredients and lab equipment can be bought legally, through commercial sources like hardware and convenience stores. Unlike the drug business of the past, there’s no risky border crossings and no big up-front money.

Claire McCaskill, a Prosecutor from Jackson County, Kansas is introduced and describes how the meth problem differs from drug problems of the past.

Claire McCaskill: Methamphetamine is a different kind of threat to rural America and to suburban America than it’s ever faced before, because it’s home grown. Our borders for methamphetamine in Missouri are the local hardware store, local convenience store, the

local liquor store. It is not the Mexican Border, or South America, or somewhere in the Far East.

Narrator: Clandestine labs can be small one or two person “Mom and Pop” operations, also known as “Beavis an Butthead” labs or, in the case of many western states, highly organized mobile production facilities, usually run and financed by Mexican National Drug Cartels, also known as Mexican National Labs.

Sergeant Steve Rinks of the Riverside County, CA Sheriffs Dept. Special Investigations Bureau is introduced and describes how the Mexican National Labs differ from the smaller operations.

Steve Rinks: You won't see a Mexican National that's operating a clandestine lab “using”. It's strictly for profit. When they come in to do an operation, they do it big time, I'm talking about hundreds of pounds of methamphetamine. They do it one time there and they're out of there. It's strictly for profit. It has nothing to do with use.

Shots of different clandestine labs are screened as the narrator and Greg McClung give more detail on the location of labs.

Narrator: Clandestine labs can be found almost anywhere. The only location requirements “cooks” desire are privacy, because of

the odors, noise, and unusual hours they keep, and a reliable source of water, heat, and electricity.

Greg McClung: The small mom and pop labs we're finding anywhere and everywhere in Los Angeles county, from kitchens to bathrooms, residential neighborhoods to hotels, motels, apartment complexes. There has recently been a trend where we are finding labs in urban areas, in machine shops, in auto body shops, in automotive repair shops. We're finding them in residences. So really, these laboratories are everywhere in California.

The trend of the large scale operators though is to go remote. That's the reason we find a lot of laboratories operating in farming environments. They blend well with the surrounding environment because they blend with the farm laborers that come in from Mexico and work the fields.

Shots of a working meth lab cover the narrator as he describes how the drug is produced.

Narrator: Once the cook has a location secured, it's just a matter of choosing a production technique. The most commonly used recipes call for mixing over-the-counter cold medications containing pseudoephedrine along with other ingredients in a process that can

be performed at separate locations if need be, in less than 24 hours.

The narrator and Greg McClung return to describe the unsafe conditions at clandestine labs, storage facilities and dumps.

Narrator: No matter what recipe they choose, or how big the operation is, all clandestine labs share one trait: a total disregard for safety. Risky production techniques combined with haphazard storage and illegal and unsafe disposal add up to a formula for tragedy.

Greg McClung: I'm more concerned for public safety when it comes to the small "Mom and Pop" labs because they are untrained "mad scientists." They have no chemistry background. They are using chemicals that are highly volatile without any training, any expertise, and they are using glassware that you would bake a cake in your kitchen. Pyrex dishes, glass bowls, anything that they can apply heat to and cause a chemical reaction. Those are the ones we're having explosions with in motels, apartment buildings, and they present the most danger to the public.

Narrator: Many times chemicals and equipment used to synthesize the drugs are housed at a separate location, often rental lockers, where the lack of ventilation and cramped space increase the potential for hazardous conditions.

Shots of children's playthings laying on the floor a working meth lab are screened as the narrator describes how meth has affected the children of cooks and users.

Narrator: Unfortunately, young children are often victimized by parents who use and cook meth. Parents become obsessed with the drug to the point where they show no regard for their children's welfare. Kids are forced to live and play in homes contaminated with toxic chemicals.

Neighbors also become unwitting victims, usually unaware of the threat that may be right next door to them.

Images of meth lab dump sites are screened as the narrator and Steve Rinks describe the impact labs have on the environment.

Narrator: Once a cook completes a batch of methamphetamine, at least 6 pounds of hazardous waste remain for every pound of

processed meth. These unwanted hazardous by-products are then indiscriminately dumped anywhere and everywhere.

Steve Rinks: Don't take it lightly. These guys, when they cook, they put it in the sewer system, they pour it down the toilet that goes to the sewer system. They pour it in the backyard, they bury it in the back yard, they'll drive along the road, toss it out of the backs of their trucks. One thing we're really concerned with is, especially on the Mexican National's operations, is that they're dumping this stuff, or digging these big pits and putting all this waste in there and eventually, if we don't find it, then it's eventually going to seep down into the groundwater.

Narrator: The resulting contamination of structures, soils, water supplies, and air emissions, and the poisoning of crops and livestock costs property owners and taxpayers millions of dollars in damages and clean-up costs, as well as the cost to law enforcement.

“THE DANGERS”

The animated graphic, **“Clandestine Drug Labs: the Problem, the Dangers, and the Future”** is seen again, then **“The Dangers”** portion of the title moves forward. We then see a “swat” style law enforcement team bust through the door of a clandestine lab. The Commander of the team, Sergeant Larry Perry, of the Arizona Dept. of Public Safety and Rick Jones of the California Environmental Protection agency are introduced and describe the unique dangers their teams face when they make an entry into a lab.

Larry Perry: There’s so many unknown situations, when we go through that door, they may be cooking one certain method that if that burners on, maybe that burner is the only thing that’s keeping those chemicals from exploding. You may have an explosion, you may have a fire, you may have toxic gases come about. All this stuff is in the back of your mind before you even go in there because you know if this guy is a tweaker and is paranoid, it’s a very hazardous situation.

Narrator: Some larger cities, counties, and states employ teams specifically trained to investigate and deactivate clandestine labs, but other cities and smaller communities often lack the resources and personnel needed to safely shut down, dismantle, or clean-up

a lab or dump site. These deficiencies, coupled with a lack of awareness of the problem, can lead to serious injury or even death.

Shots of a working lab along with responders entering a lab with respirators on are screened as the narrator and Steve Rinks and Rick Jones described the dangers facing personnel not trained to enter a clandestine lab.

Narrator: Many times labs have been discovered by firefighters, police officers, child welfare workers, postal employees, neighbors, and even landlords making what seemed like a routine call.

Rick Jones: Basically, our department's feeling is that people who are not trained in how to deal with hazardous materials should basically isolate the area and back out, and call in your local hazmat team and/or clan lab task force. They have people on staff who are trained to know what chemicals are involved and what the specific hazards are, and they also are equipped with the proper protective equipment so that they don't put themselves at risk.

Steve Rinks: Well, to take it from the top, if you're a patrol deputy and you're out on a beat and you get a call from a suspicious circumstance or something like that or you may even go to a

domestic violence call or something, you get there and you see that you have suspected clandestine lab paraphernalia, that being the chemical containers, chemical odor, If you get into a house and you see something cooking on a stove and you think that it's lab related, do not turn that heat off, what you need to do, **Steve Rinks: (cont,)** just back everybody out and call a clandestine lab team to handle it appropriately and safely

Narrator: Lack of ventilation at clandestine labs combined with a potentially oxygen-deficient atmosphere and the presence of reactive, toxic, corrosive, and flammable materials, can all lead to a number of potentially hazardous scenarios.

Tom Harber, of the Las Vegas Metro Police Departments Narcotics Section is introduced. Shots of firefighters responding to a clandestine lab fire are screened as Tom talks about the threat of fires and explosions.

Tom Harber: With this particular process we've seen a real drastic increase in fires at residences, apartments, and hotels rooms where reactions have gone bad and ignited. And that creates a real problem. Some of the chemicals, number one, are water reactive. First thing that happens in the hotels and motels is sprinkler

systems go off and spray onto the water reactive chemicals in the room.

Narrator: Confined spaces, chemical reactions already in progress, and makeshift electrical wiring and plumbing also pose a threat. Often, sloppy housekeeping results in incompatible and reactive chemicals being stored together. Explosions occur as a result of mislabeling or operators mixing the wrong chemicals.

Narrator:(cont.) Besides explosions and fires, chemical reactions can also generate highly poisonous gases that can kill within a few breaths.

The narrator and Greg McClung go on to describe the things that firefighters, beat cops, landlords, and health works can look for to help them identify a clandestine lab, storage facility, or dump site. “Bulleted” graphics reinforce key points.

Narrator: Being able to identify the signs of clandestine lab activities and the resulting waste abandonment sites will help you to protect yourself and others at risk. First off, only trained investigators should enter a suspected lab and only a trained chemist should handle any clandestine lab equipment or chemicals.

Suspected “cooks” are considered dangerous and are often armed and under the influence of drugs. Labs are often fortified and may have security and alarm systems as well as booby traps installed.

Strong unusual and chemical odors are often present at labs. The smell associated with dirty diapers, rotten fish, ammonia, and a vinegar-like odor is commonly reported.

Narrator: Other proximity indicators, exposure symptoms, and complaints that may affect operators or neighbors near a clandestine lab include: blurred vision or irritated eyes, nose, or throat. Breathing difficulties, shortness of breath, or a tightness in the chest. Anxiety, dizziness, headache, and nausea. Reports of drowsiness, lack of coordination, and flu-like symptoms are also common signs.

Unusual late night activity and people coming outside to smoke is another possible tip-off of lab activity. In rural areas, suspicious late night traffic and electrical generator noise may also be a sign.

Greg McClung: Another sign is to property owners. You need to be aware of your renters. What they're doing on your property. In sheds, in barns. Are they allowing you access when you come on the property. Are there areas on the property where your renters

are saying, hey, I don't want you hanging out over there or going by that location. It should throw up a red flag to you as a property owner that there could be some criminal activity occurring on your property.

Narrator: Landlords may even be held liable for clean-up costs so its better to report any suspicious activity immediately.

The presence of any precursor materials used to manufacture meth: large quantities of cold medication, cans of Freon, ether, “Coleman Fuel,” or other solvents and “Red Devil” drain cleaner suggests that a clandestine lab may be operating.

Commercial and improvised laboratory glassware and equipment is also a tip-off. Graduated cylinders, beakers, flasks, reaction vessels, glass and plastic tubing, funnels, measuring cups, and Pyrex cookware, have all been found at labs and storage facilities used to house paraphernalia between cooks.

Some of the commercial and household equipment frequently found includes: heating mantles, refrigerators, thermometers, ring stands, vacuum pumps, rheostats, scales, double boilers, crock pots, hot plates, buckets, ice chests, yellow mop pails, rubber gloves, and paper coffee filters.

Being able to recognize **materials found at clandestine lab dump sites** can help you take actions that will lead to their eventual cleanup.

Rick Jones: Often what happens is that these cooks take their waste products from the labs and simply put them into baggies and/or the original containers that they were in and then they'll dump them alongside of the road. Some of the things you might recognize are empty medicine bottles, for Sudafed; your over-the-counter cold tablets; empty freon cans or 5-gallon cans, they're usually gray in color; caustic soda cans and/or bags; red phosphorous stained sheets, or filters, stuff of that nature would certainly indicate to a trained person that this waste may be associated with a clan lab, and proper PPE should be worn before the bags are opened.

Narrator: Other items found at dump sites include broken laboratory equipment, discarded clothing, shoes, gloves, respirator mask filters and dust masks.

If you believe you've discovered a clandestine lab , storage facility, or dump, never handle containers, glassware, or equipment. Don't be tempted to interrupt or "shut down" a "cook" that is in progress. It may do more harm than good by causing the release of explosive or toxic vapors. Never interrupt chemical reactions, refrigeration and ventilation processes, water supplies, or operating distribution

systems. And don't turn on or off any power or light switches, they may spark explosive vapors or although rare, may be booby trapped.

The narrator and Steve Rinks then explain the process that trained investigators and chemist must adhere to after a lab has been discovered. Shots of teams dressed in special protective clothing dismantling a lab cover the narrators copy.

Narrator: After a lab, storage facility, or waste abandonment site has been discovered, it is important that a lab certified officer and chemist certified in clandestine lab assessment make a thorough hazard assessment of the site. This team is suited in personal protective equipment, which may include Self Contained Breathing Apparatus, or SCBA, and protective clothing.

Steve Rinks: We suit up in a Level B, or whatever's appropriate for the situation. We'll go in and we'll do an assessment. We'll take photographs of whatever needs to be done. We'll get a plan together to dismantle the lab safely.

Narrator: During an assessment lab certified officers and chemists know to expect the unexpected and follow a strict checklist with safety as the number one priority.

Shots of Hazmat contractors cleaning up clandestine labs and dump sites covers the narrators description of the process.

Narrator: Once the site has been secured, assessed and monitored, and samples have been taken as court evidence, it's then safely dismantled and inventoried. Ultimately, the site needs to be cleaned up to a level safe for rehabilitation.

The initial, or "Gross" cleanup involves the removal of any materials that pose an immediate or potential health threat, including finished product and any toxic, corrosive, ignitable, or reactive materials.

Government agencies and property owners are required to hire trained, licensed hazardous waste contractors to perform the work, which can run from 3,000 to 100,000 dollars per site.

U.S. Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona, Chairperson of the Senate Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Govt. Information, is introduced and explains how the government views the clean-up of clan lab sites.

Senator Kyl: Everyone wants to see to it that the environment is protected, that the deleterious substances are properly disposed of,

that the sites are then cleaned and that there isn't any residue that's of any danger to anyone. But the cost of doing that can be

Senator Kyl: (cont.) significant, especially for some of the smaller communities, and that's why congress has to step in to provide the funding to the federal agencies, to ensure that there is money available for these cleanups and that no local authorities back away from appropriate law enforcement just because they won't have the funds to clean up the site after they've concluded their work.

Narrator: Final remediation of the site requires the removal and disposal of all hazardous wastes left from the gross cleanup phase, and returning the property to a livable state.

Gerald Munoz of the LA County Fire Department's Health Hazmat Division's Emergency Response Unit is introduced and describes the challenge of final clean-up of a clandestine lab.

Gerald Munoz: Trying to assess how much has penetrated the walls, the floors, and the ground, may take a longer time to assess. We need to take samples of the soils and the areas we suspect and then we have to address that usually with the property owner. The property owner must then contract another disposal company or the same disposal company if he wants, come back in and remove all

of that contamination. There are times where we've had contamination so bad and so expensive, the property owner has decided not to do anything with the property and those sites are still under our control.

THE FUTURE

The animated graphic, "Clandestine Drug Labs: the Problem, the Dangers, and the Future," is seen for the final time, then "the Future" title moves forward. The narrator and the clandestine lab investigators and responders seen previously in the program then give their opinions on what the future holds for curtailing the problem.

Narrator: Unfortunately, the use of methamphetamine is expected to spread across the U.S. on an eastern track. Recent take downs on clandestine labs in the Midwest and the East indicate that the drug is beginning to gain a foothold there.

Senator Kyl: In Arizona and California we are apparently right on the front line of the methamphetamine epidemic, but we're beginning to hear from some folks throughout the country about the problem in Missouri and Iowa and North Carolina and Illinois. States that it doesn't particularly make any sense that the drug

would pop up in, but it is popping up. And I'm sure it's just a matter of time before it's all over the country.

Narrator: Getting the public involved is crucial. Informing communities about the dangers of the drug, along with urging landlords, business owners, and neighbors to contact police when they suspect manufacturing activities in their area can make a difference.

Senator Kyl: One of the things that we are trying to do is have field hearings in several different states to bring more public awareness to the problem. Not only of the use of the drug, and the implications for law enforcement, but also the environmental considerations, because what the chemicals that are used to make methamphetamine do to the environment if they are not properly handled and disposed of.

Narrator: The cooperation of chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturers, distributors, and sellers is also key to curtailing the spread of the methamphetamine.

Greg McClung: On a federal, state, and local level, we've developed a strategy to go after the source of the chemicals. If we can deny chemicals to the laboratory operators, then we think we'll see a reduction in the methamphetamine produced in California and distributed throughout the United States.

Claire McCaskill: It's difficult to deter a meth addict, someone who is really addicted to methamphetamine. I mean they have given up their job; they've given up their family; they've given up their life. It's unlikely that the threat of someone busting them is really going to modify their behavior. On the other hand, if you've got businesses out there that are supplying the ingredients to make methamphetamine. Those business owners can be deterred by aggressive law enforcement.

Narrator: Educating firefighters and law enforcement, as well as health and human service personnel to be more aware of clandestine drug labs in their daily work can also have an impact.

Gerald Munoz: One of the things we've been trying to do here in LA County is to try and educate as many fire fighters and police officers as we can as to what to look for when they come across an incident that may be a foreign explosion and determine if it could be a lab, any kind of lab and we've been doing some of that through classes where we show them some of the glassware, some of the chemicals that could be used, some of the byproducts so they can be more aware of what to expect if they come across a drug lab.

Narrator: The office of the White House has also established the National Clandestine Drug Laboratory Emergency Response and Management Training Program, a comprehensive and standardized training course developed specifically for law enforcement, fire service, emergency medical service providers, and environmental health personnel.

For more information contact Lisa Boynton at US EPA's Superfund Branch at 703-603-9052.