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Iowa Unveils “Chemical Lock” to Clamp Down on U.S. Meth Labs

A new chemical tool to combat the illegal production of methamphetamine nationwide was unveiled today by Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture Patty Judge, U.S. Senator Tom Harkin and Congressman Leonard Boswell, along with representatives of the Agribusiness Association of Iowa, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and a host of other officials at a news conference outside the Capitol in Des Moines. The announcement was made in front of an Anhydrous Ammonia fertilizer nurse tank bearing a STOP METH sign.

“Iowa continues to be a leader in pioneering meth-fighting strategies that benefit the nation,” said Vilsack in announcing Iowa State University researchers have found that Calcium Nitrate works as an effective meth inhibitor when added in prescribed amounts to Anhydrous Ammonia.

“I want to thank Senator Harkin for his leadership, along with Senator Grassley in securing federal grants that enabled researchers to make this discovery,” said Vilsack. “Thanks also to Congressman Boswell who, as co-chair of the House Meth Caucus, has been on the forefront of combating meth, and to the remainder of Iowa’s congressional delegation for their support. I especially want to express my appreciation to the Agribusiness Association of Iowa for its proactive private-sector involvement in seeking out this discovery.”

The Iowa State research, confirmed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s forensics lab, found that meth cooks who use untreated Anhydrous Ammonia typically get a 42 percent yield of pseudoephedrine for conversion to meth. However, that yield drops to two percent or less when the Calcium Nitrate inhibitor is added.

“This is an important discovery and one that will help in our continuing fight against methamphetamine production,” said Judge. “Putting calcium nitrate into the anhydrous ammonia nurse tanks will render them useless in making meth. This compound will be a meth cook’s worst nightmare, but for the rest of us, it is a safe product, and has no negative impact on our environment, or farm equipment.”

Anhydrous Ammonia is used in one of two primary meth production methods, and is the method of choice in agricultural states where Anhydrous Ammonia is commonly used as a fertilizer. In Iowa this year, 93 percent of the State's 259 meth labs have been the Anhydrous Ammonia type.

“Despite a 77 percent drop in Iowa's meth labs, we know meth cooks continue to go to multiple pharmacies to get enough pseudoephedrine to produce the drug,” said Marvin Van Haaften, Iowa's Drug Policy Coordinator and Director of the Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy. “There is no silver bullet to totally eliminate meth, but the new inhibitor will help get us closer.”

“The meth inhibitor has already proven effective in field tests at three Iowa sites, where in each case meth cooks have abandoned the treated Anhydrous Ammonia” said Dave Coppess, Vice President of Heartland Co-op in West Des Moines, Chairman of the national Ag Retailers Association and a member of the Agribusiness Association of Iowa.

Researchers say the chemical reaction between Anhydrous Ammonia and Calcium Nitrate also means more is less, because meth cooks who try using more of the treated Anhydrous Ammonia to defeat the inhibitor will actually produce even less meth.

“As co-chair of the House Meth Caucus, I see this discovery as having a great potential for reducing meth production not only in Iowa, but across our nation,” according to Boswell.

Use of the new meth inhibitor will be on a voluntary basis in Iowa. Ag retailers who participate will receive the formula for injecting Calcium Nitrate into Anhydrous Ammonia, as well as the Agribusiness Association of Iowa's STOP METH signage for placement on their nurse tanks.

“Together with rigorous enforcement efforts, Anhydrous Ammonia tank locks and strong regulatory controls on the key meth ingredient—pseudoephedrine--the Calcium Nitrate meth inhibitor is one more powerful tool to help cut illegal meth production,” added Harkin. “The message for would-be meth cooks where the meth inhibitor is used is ‘Don't Bother’.”

Other officials attending the news conference included: George Kraus, Chemistry Professor at Iowa State University in Ames; Nelson Santos, Associate Deputy Assistant Administrator for the DEA Office of Forensic Sciences; Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller; Bruce Reeve, Director of the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation Laboratory; Mona Bond, CEO of the Agribusiness Association of Iowa; and Shirley McGuire and Art Fleener of the U.S. Department of Transportation.