



METH BUSTERS: DTSC Role In Cleaning Up Drug Labs

When cops in [Clearlake](#) busted a suspected methamphetamine laboratory in February, it helped shine a spotlight on an often little-noticed – but vitally important – function of the [California Department of Toxic Substances Control](#): helping mitigate illicit drug sites.

Law enforcement is the first line of defense in the war against meth, but DTSC certainly plays a strong supporting role. After the handcuffs go on, DTSC, along with its six contractors across the state, remove the most serious toxic threats at the lab sites. They conduct the early-stage removals at the majority of discovered meth lab sites in California, said Adam Palmer, supervising hazardous substance scientist in DTSC's Emergency Response Unit.



A call can come in at any time, and DTSC's goal is to get a cleanup crew to the site within four hours. That team will remove the most serious threats, and then turn the case over to the counties, who work with property owners to assess and, if necessary, mitigate residue in walls, floors and even septic systems.

"No one wants a meth lab as their neighbor," said Palmer. "This type of work that we do is critically important. We are removing substances that pose an immediate threat to public health and the environment."

In 2012, DTSC responded to 132 meth labs and disposal sites from Del Norte to Riverside counties at a cost of \$327,000. Illegal labs were reported in 30 of the state's 58 counties, Palmer said.

The [production of methamphetamine](#) is nasty and dangerous. It involves mixing acid, lye and other toxic ingredients in often unventilated buildings. The smell has been variously described as akin to ammonia,



DEPARTMENT of TOXIC SUBSTANCES CONTROL

cat urine and rotten eggs. Done incorrectly or near flame, the result can be an explosion and fire – spewing toxic materials all over the area

Police serving an arrest warrant stumbled upon the lab in Clearlake. That led to an evacuation of the neighborhood while an investigation took place. The discovery prompted a call to a [DTSC duty officer](#), who in turn sent out employees of a company in Chico that contracts to clean up contaminated sites, including meth labs.

Usually a contractor does the work, but field staff from DTSC will respond if the site is large or heavily contaminated. All DTSC emergency response personnel have received a 6-week Hazardous Materials Technician/Specialist training, as well as classes addressing the hazards posed by meth production and meth-contaminated properties, Palmer said.

The cleanup process involves crews wearing protective gear and respirators removing the caustic chemicals and cooking implements, as well as carpets, soil and other heavily contaminated items. A cleanup can take hours, especially if the site is remote.

The manufacturing process has been known to contaminate the drywall, and “cooks” often dump ingredients down drains or into septic systems, or bury them in the yard, said Laura Greer, Hazardous Materials Division Manager at PARC Specialty Contractors, a Sacramento company and DTSC contractor.

“They put them in the septic systems, which leaches out and is a whole other mess,” Greer said, adding that meth labs are more common in rural areas, but can be found in cities as well. The drug can be prepared in big super labs, in small “box’ or “one pot” (also called “shake and bake”) labs, which are the size of a backpack or soda bottle, and can easily be transported, making them elusive.

“No specific areas are immune,” Greer said. “It’s everywhere.”

The number of meth labs reported in California has decreased in recent years, but few people believe that’s because the problem is less. The Patriot Act of 2006 moved the main ingredient, pseudoephedrine, which is an ingredient of cold medicine, behind pharmacy counters, but industry officials suggest that law enforcement cutbacks and the shift from super lab to smaller and harder to detect varieties have contributed to a decline in discoveries in recent years.

“The use of meth in California is not going down,” said Michael A. Polkabl of BioMax Environmental, who lectures on the subject. “It is the most addictive drug we know of.”

(Photo by Parc Environmental of a drug lab in Fresno that caught fire in October 2012, and DTSC contractors from Parc Environmental removed remaining materials from it.)