

What you need to know about Mobile Meth Labs

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Highway workers are no strangers to hazardous conditions. Whether dealing with extreme weather, heavy machinery, or roadside accidents, their job is inherently risky. However, one often-overlooked danger lurking in roadside ditches is the remnants of the shake-and-bake mobile meth lab. These makeshift drug labs not only pose environmental risks but also serious threats to the health and safety of those crew members tasked with roadside cleanup.

What is a Shake-and-Bake Meth Lab?

The shake-and-bake method of producing methamphetamine is a highly dangerous, mobile process that requires few ingredients and can be done in something as simple as a plastic soda bottle. Unlike traditional meth labs, which require a stationary setup, this method allows drug manufacturers to create meth on-the-go (often moved in backpacks, totes, or coolers). However, the chemical reaction is volatile, and improper handling can lead to explosions or toxic waste spills.

The Risk to Your Crew

When meth makers discard the remnants of their shake-and-bake operations, they often do so irresponsibly by tossing used bottles, chemical containers, and other hazardous waste into roadside ditches. Crews that come into contact with these discarded materials may face the following hazards:

- **Chemical Burns and Toxic Exposure:** The leftover substances in these bottles can be highly volatile, leading to chemical burns, respiratory issues, and other severe health affects upon contact.
- **Explosive Hazards:** Even after being discarded, some of these bottles may still contain active chemicals that can ignite or explode if disturbed.
- **Environmental Contamination:** The chemicals used can seep into the soil and water, causing long-term environmental damage and posing risks to both workers and wildlife.



Photo by WRGB Staff

How to Identify Suspected Meth Waste

Highway workers should be trained to recognize the signs of discarded mobile meth lab waste (*check out this issues Safety Series Poster for more information*) and follow strict safety protocols. Here are a few key factors to watch for:

- Plastic soda or sports drink bottles containing a sludgy residue, particularly with a white or yellowish tint.
- Bottles with tubing attached or burn marks.
- Unusual chemical odors, similar to ammonia or cat urine.
- Unlabeled containers with unknown liquids or powders.

If a worker suspects they have encountered a mobile meth lab:

- **Do Not Touch It** – Avoid disturbing the materials.
- **Report It Immediately** – Notify a supervisor and local law enforcement.
- **Mark the Area** – If safe to do so, clearly mark the location to prevent others from approaching until *professionals* can properly dispose of the hazardous materials.

Awareness and Training

To ensure the safety of your crew, highway departments should provide workers with training on how to recognize and respond to meth-related hazards. Regular safety briefings, including tailgate talks on hazardous waste recognition, can help keep workers informed and prepared. In addition, collaboration with law enforcement and hazardous material disposal teams can improve response times and ensure that dangerous materials are removed safely and effectively.



Photo by NBC 24; Brian Schwartz