



CQ HEALTHBEAT NEWS

## Baucus Ponders the Latest Bulge in the Meth Balloon

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By John Reichard, CQ HealthBeat Editor

Frustrated Senate Finance Committee leaders said at a hearing Tuesday they are seeking new ways to counter methamphetamine abuse in the United States despite the apparent success of a year-old law shutting down many makeshift production labs. “We push the balloon some place, it tends to pop up someplace else,” complained Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont.

“Four of five county sheriffs report that local meth production is down,” Baucus said, citing a survey by the National Association of Counties. “But meth abuse is not,” he said. “Now an estimated 80 percent of meth consumed in the United States originates in Mexico. It’s smuggled in.” The committee’s senior Republican, Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, said the meth coming from Mexico is more potent. “We’re hearing from law enforcement that this foreign meth is stronger . . . leading to increased overdoses and deaths.”

“There is evidence that we are making progress” against methamphetamine distribution since the passage a year ago of a law targeting the drug, Baucus said. Known as the “Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act,” the law (PL 109-177) sought to make it harder for “meth cookers” to obtain supplies of meth’s ingredients from cough and cold drugs sold in drug stores. Drugs containing the ingredients ephedrine and pseudoephedrine are now sold in more limited quantities and are kept behind the pharmacy counter. Customers must provide photo identification and sign a sales log to buy drugs containing the ingredients.

But problems remain with the law: Some meth makers “smurf,” which involves going to many stores to buy small quantities of drugs containing the precursor ingredients and signing the logs in each store, making it harder for law enforcement personnel to track all their purchases. But lawmakers and law enforcement say the number of makeshift labs that cook the ingredients into methamphetamine is way down. Partly as a result of the law, “meth lab seizures declined 42 percent nationwide” last year, Baucus said.

Witnesses urged lawmakers to supplement their efforts with much more advertising to frighten the public about the dangers of methamphetamine abuse. They also noted new U.S.-Mexico efforts targeting “superlabs” south of the border that produce abundant exports, still making meth easily accessible in the United States. But Grassley wondered how distribution might shift if supplies from Mexico are successfully reduced.

Joseph T. Rannazzisi, an official with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said his agency “has been working shoulder to shoulder with the government of Mexico” targeting meth labs in that country and trafficking of the drug into the United States. And as of January 2008, Mexico will stop all imports of the precursor ingredients pseudoephedrine and ephedrine, he said, making it harder for traffickers in that country to manufacture the drug.

Christy A. McCampbell, a narcotics control official with the U.S. State Department, said “major Mexican criminal organizations control most mid-level and retail methamphetamine distribution in long-established markets, such as the Pacific, Southwest, and West Central regions, and are expanding their distribution into the Great Lakes, Northeast and Southeast regions of the United States.” To counter that distribution,

McC Campbell said the two nations will soon announce the details of a new agreement to counter narcotics trafficking. But McC Campbell also testified that worldwide use of methamphetamines is on the rise.

Thomas M. Siebel, founder an advertising campaign called "The Meth Project," said spending more money to publicize the dangers of meth would shrink demand for the drug.

Siebel told intrigued lawmakers that a two-year intensive campaign in Montana featuring shock ads to highlight dangers of the drug led to a 53 percent reduction in crime related to the drug in the state. It also led to a 70 percent decline in workers in the state testing positive for the drug, he added. Siebel claimed that a nationwide campaign would have similarly dramatic results. "I believe for \$100 million a year we would reduce methamphetamine use by 50 percent in the United States," he said.

"We have been the largest advertiser in Montana" over the past two years, said Siebel, who was recently profiled in the New York Times as a software billionaire who wants to shock Montana away from a drug that has "ravaged" the state. The ads have run 45,000 times on TV and 35,000 times on radio in the state, Siebel said.

One ad shows a picture of a badly beaten woman with a message that says "My mom knows I'd never hurt her. Then she got in the way." Another ad with an image of a filthy bathroom stall says, "No one thinks they'll lose their virginity here. Meth will change that." In two other ads, an enraged boy on meth robs a family and a girl is depicted plucking out her entire eyebrow while high. The slogan appearing with the ads: "Meth – not even once."