

Farmers Fight Fertilizer Rustlers

DUNCAN, Okla., June 22, 2004

When the sun goes down over America's farms, anxiety goes up for local police.

Hidden in the shadows are the nation's new rustlers, not stealing cattle but, as **CBS News Correspondent Lee Cowan** reports, chemicals. They're being used to make a drug as potent as cocaine.

"It is a scourge on society, especially here in Oklahoma," says Carey Rouse of the Duncan Oklahoma Drug Task Force.

The drug is methamphetamine and what Oklahoma has in bountiful supply is the key ingredient to make it: a farm fertilizer stored in tanks so easily accessible that meth labs have been popping up like toxic rows of grain.

"We're talking about a 12,000 percent increase in ten years," says Rouse. "Whoever thought some Oklahoma farmers would be part of the nation's drug problem."

Public service announcements have alerted farmers to the risk of not locking their tanks.

Some, like Dillon Woodard, still fear for their lives.

"I was afraid to get killed," says Woodard. "They don't mind doing anything, ya know."

So one Oklahoma police department took a page out of a hunting handbook.

They set up tiny cameras usually used to track game and focused them instead on those who made a game out of dealing.

"At the initial deployment, it was like a drive-in restaurant," says Rouse. "We had people that would be coming and hitting the tank two and three times in one night, we did not anticipate anything like that."

The grainy frames from the farm aren't only capturing suspects, they're also capturing the danger and the determination of those so hooked on this drug that they're willing to do almost anything to get what's in the tanks, out. It's the only ingredient not readily available right over the counter.

The rest are household products: a witches' brew of solvents and cold tablets, activated when mixed with the ammonia fertilizer.

"As soon as it hits your skin it freezes it," says William Tate, who was convicted of theft.

Tate was lucky. He largely avoided the poisonous cloud the ammonia gives off, but another man, an addict so manic for meth, burned his eyes and face for less than a cupful.

"It's a driving force that causes you to go and do this stuff and you don't know why you're doing it," says Tate.

The cameras are credited with keeping some meth off the streets, but with desperation this deep, cameras aren't likely to stop some people from trying.