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Meth labs on rise locally

The number of discovered meth labs dropped nearly 10 percent statewide last year, but 101 were busted in Snohomish County, an increase of three.

By Diana Hefley
Herald Writer

Snohomish County was one of a dozen counties last year that saw an increase in methamphetamine labs, according to a report released by the state Department of Ecology.

Overall, the number of labs around the state dropped by 143 from the previous year, the report said.

The department received reports of 1,337 labs last year, a 9.6 percent decrease from 2003.

Snohomish County remains one of the top lab producers in the state, coming in behind King and Pierce counties.

Last year, 101 labs in Snohomish County were reported to the state. That is three more than the previous year.

Despite the slight jump last year, the rate of increase is significantly slowing down.

The number of labs almost doubled in 2001 and increased another 20 percent the following year.

The steady increase in labs likely can be attributed to meth cooks learning how to make their own anhydrous ammonia, said Sgt. Mark Richardson with the Snohomish Regional Drug Task Force.

Ammonia is a common ingredient needed to make the drug. Police made efforts to crack down on ammonia thefts.

"Then someone comes up with making their own ammonia," Richardson said. "We saw a steady incline in the labs."

Task force detectives are seeing another method being used to cook meth, which is even faster, he said.

Richardson believes that the drop in labs around the state last year can partially be attributed to the increase of imported methamphetamine.

The price of the higher-quality crystallized meth, known as "ice" or "glass," has dropped.

"It's become cheaper to buy than the risk or costs of making it," Richardson said.

The task force is almost exclusively finding "ice," but hasn't found a crystallized meth operation in Snohomish County, Richardson said.

Likely the drug is being imported from California, where Mexican nationals set up "super labs."

A couple of those super labs have been discovered in Washington, Richardson said.

Last year, the regional task force seized 3,096 grams of meth, valued at nearly \$190,000.

"We've put some bigger cooks in jail, and we're making it a little more uncomfortable for them and they're moving elsewhere," Richardson said.

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