

Cleaning Up Alaska's Drug Labs

By Representative Jim Holm, District 9

If you look inside your cabinets or in your garage, are you likely to find Sudafed, lye, and engine starting fluid lying around? If so, you have the ingredients to make methamphetamines in your home. How do I know this? I discovered this information and instructions on how to make "meth" on a Web site accessible to everyone, including your children.

If you've been reading the papers lately, you are probably aware that meth labs in hotels, apartments, mobile homes, cabins and boats are a growing, and deadly, trend in Alaska. More than 90 meth labs have been discovered in Alaska in the last four years. Last month, an alleged meth lab may have caused the fire in a room of the Aspen Hotel in Fairbanks that is costing the hotel almost \$35,000 to clean and repair.

Currently, Alaska has no basic standards for the cleanup of illegal drug labs. The potential consequences of long-term exposure to these chemicals, which can be absorbed by building materials and furniture, leave dangerous remnants for future occupants and their children to deal with. I think it's about time Alaskans became a little safer in their homes, offices, and hotel rooms.

The chemicals used in "cooking meth" are extremely hazardous. Ethyl Ether, obtained from engine starting fluid, is very flammable and heavier than air. Besides being dangerous if used around fire or sparks, it's an anesthetic and can cause respiratory collapse if too much is inhaled. How much is too much? Hydrogen gas, a chemical byproduct, is explosive and lighter than air; benzene is a VOC volatile organic compound known to cause cancer.

The potential consequences of "cooking meth" are really bad, but the effects of taking meth or being exposed to meth residues over time are horrendous. Short-term effects include irritability, insomnia, confusion, tremors, convulsions, anxiety, paranoia and aggressiveness. In the long term, meth can cause an increase in blood pressure and heart rate that may produce strokes due to irreversible damage to the blood vessels in the brain. Meth can also cause respiratory problems, irregular heartbeat, and extreme anorexia. Death can result from hyperthermia, convulsions, or cardiovascular collapse. In addition, use of or exposure to meth residues can result in symptoms similar to those of Parkinson's Disease due to the reduction of the brain's production of dopamine. This is not an innocuous high.

House Bill 59, which I am sponsoring, will set the standards and basic requirements for the cleanup of sites where controlled substances, such as methamphetamines, were manufactured or stored. My job as a representative of the citizens of Alaska is to help protect the health and insure the safety of Alaskans. I think this bill helps accomplish this mission.

House Bill 59 will also require the property owner to be responsible for cleaning up the hazardous materials after law enforcement agencies discover an illegal lab. Before the structure can again be used, the property owner must provide test results that show the levels of contamination are below Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) limits.

This bill will require that the DEC establish procedures for testing property and maintain a list of labs capable of testing the site. HB 59 will also require that the property be vacant within four days of notification, and the DEC (or whichever law enforcement agency makes the bust) must notify the property owner of the correct cleanup procedures and testing guidelines, as well as provide a list of laboratories that may be used for determining the property's habitability.

One of the most important protections for Alaskans included in this bill is the stipulation that future buyers have full disclosure if the property was not cleaned to DEC standards. For Alaskans to feel safe in their beds, they must know that the property they're buying isn't toxic to themselves or their children. This will help us all sleep a little easier at night.

If you have a story or information you would like to share related to House Bill 59 and the cleanup of illegal drug sites, you can testify from your local Legislative Information Office (LIO) during its hearing in the House Judiciary Committee on Feb. 19. Also, please contact your representative via mail, email, or telephone to support this important public safety legislation. You can find your LIO and your representative's contact information at www.legis.state.ak.us.

Rep. Holm (R-Fairbanks) is the CEO of Holm Town Nursery Inc., in Fairbanks, where he lives with his wife, Marcia. He has been a Fairbanks resident since 1946. Rep. Holm Co-Chairs the Transportation Committee, Vice-Chairs the State Affairs Committee, and serves on the Judiciary Committee and the Corrections, Revenue, and Transportation & Public Facilities Finance Subcommittees. He can be reached at 907-465-3446.