

Methamphetamine fuels the West's oil and gas boom

Long the drug of choice for rural down-and-out youth, crank becomes commonplace among drill-rig roughnecks

by Patrick Farrell

CRAIG, Colorado — Sheriff Buddy Grinstead, a solidly built cop's cop who benches 300 pounds, is only beginning to wrap his ham-hock-sized arms around the drug problem that he says is swallowing his county.

As he drives his unmarked white SUV down Craig's main drag, Grinstead points out a low-slung motel, where Craig police recently busted dealers with methamphetamine, the cheap, synthetically produced stimulant known for its long-lasting high. Not a block farther, he nods at a run-down apartment, a well-known crash pad for addicts. Up the hill, behind the main street, he pauses at a well-kept ranch-style home, where a few years ago a local developer was busted for cooking and selling the highly addictive drug, which traces its chemical lineage back to the stamina or "pep" pills given to both Allied and Axis soldiers during World War II.

Over the years, methamphetamine has claimed victims from across the socio-economic spectrum, but according to Grinstead and energy industry insiders, it has recently become epidemic on the oil and gas rigs sprouting in the dusty expanses around Craig, a small town of roughly 10,000 in the northwest corner of Colorado.

Grinstead busted his first meth lab in 1987, but says he didn't think much about it; the "cook" was from California, and the whole operation seemed out of place in his area. Then, around 2000 — at about the same time as the natural gas boom took off — he noticed an increase in meth use and related crimes. It was like a "light switch went on," says one of Grinstead's deputies, a drug investigator who asked to remain anonymous. "It was like a disease; everyone had it."

Grinstead says he's spoken with law enforcement officers from around the West who say the drug has engulfed their small communities. Meth recipes abound on the Internet, and most of the ingredients — over-the-counter cold pills, propane, drain cleaner, iodine and ammonia — are easily procured in rural areas ([HCN, 8/14/00: Meth invasion](#)).

A survey from the National Association of Counties, released in July, found that methamphetamine is the number-one drug problem for 57 percent of suburban and rural counties. Half of the counties estimated that one-fifth of their inmates were in jail for meth-related crimes.

Of the 82 inmates in Grinstead's jail in early August, seven were there for meth possession. But dig a little deeper, Grinstead says, and most of the check forgeries, domestic violence cases and burglaries trace back to crank. Moffat County District Attorney Bonnie Roesink just hired another attorney to help her work through a felony caseload that nearly doubled from 2002 to 2004 with meth-related crimes.

Every year for the past three years, law enforcement officers have discovered a meth lab somewhere in Moffat County's 4,700 square miles, and Grinstead is certain that more lurk in the area. He says the drug is already overwhelming his small staff of 11 deputies, and he fears the problem will only grow as more energy workers move to Craig, to nearby Vernal, Utah, and to the oil and gas fields of southern Wyoming.

So early this year, Grinstead, a solid Republican with friends and family in the energy business, made a radical suggestion. At a February county commissioners' meeting, he called for random drug testing of all oil and

gas workers. With that request, he publicly declared that the county's oil and gas industry — one of its main economic engines — has a drug problem that it can't or won't control.

"I'm not saying everyone in oil and gas is a druggie," says Grinstead, "but these traveling drill crews seem to have a problem."

You're wired or you're fired

To confirm that meth use is widespread in the oil and gas fields, go no further than Grinstead's jail, and ask Tony Peck, a wiry, shaggy-haired inmate currently doing six months for violating probation for meth possession. In recent years, Peck has found steady work as a roughneck. It's a tough job, and to get him through the 12-hour days of drilling, he has often turned to meth. Known as "poor man's cocaine," the drug delivers a similar euphoric high. A hit of meth can keep a user awake for hours, even days — at least at first.

"You work long hours, you thought the meth was keeping you awake, but after a while it didn't do much, you have to keep taking more," says the 37-year-old Peck. At the height of his use, he says, he was eating or smoking more than a gram of methamphetamine in a day, at a cost of \$200 to \$300.

Peck has been in and out of jail for driving under the influence, possession of marijuana and methamphetamine, and grand theft auto. But once released, he says, he finds it easy to get work again. Towards the end of one of his most recent prison stints, he sent a note to the head jailer asking if he could be let out first thing on his release day, so he could get his work clothes ready. The lieutenant agreed, and Peck was out at 12:01 a.m. Not six hours out of the clink, Peck was back pushing pipe. And for him, going back to work meant going back to meth.

Peck says he often took meth on the job with fellow rig-hands. Having worked construction and various other jobs, Peck knows how prevalent the drug's use is. However, he, too, says it seems to be especially widespread in the oil and gas fields, where the long, hard hours mean a lot of money, and a little extra pick-me-up can get a working stiff through his shift.

One former roughneck says the problem is so ingrained that there's a saying around the rigs, "Either you're wired or you're fired." But a wired worker is often a dangerous worker. Though he was often high on the job, it scared Peck to work with other meth users, especially the ones who were "spinning out" — in the throes of the drug's intense chemical high.

Rig work — amid a spider's web of chains, cranes and thousands of pounds of swinging steel pipe — is dangerous and demanding, even for a crew of sober workers. While the U.S. Department of Labor doesn't keep statistics on drug-related accidents, the everyday peril of oil and gas work is well-documented. During a two-week period last August, two workers on separate rigs in the Pinedale, Wyo., region were killed on the job.

Peck, who has dreams of starting his own drilling business when he gets out of jail next year, says he's tried to kick his habit. But hooked on a drug that has one of the highest relapse rates of any illegal drug, and lacking a real treatment plan, his future looks grim. "I'd like to get off the meth," he says "But I haven't been offered any (treatment)."

Industry bosses in denial

Sheriff Grinstead isn't the only public official to make the connection between the meth problem and the oil and gas industry. At a coalbed methane industry conference in May, Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, D, called on industry leaders to consider the effects of meth on their workforce, and to pressure the Legislature for meth treatment programs. But industry management has only recently begun to wrestle with the problem.

"There's a lot of meth out there," says Dyan Piscopo, a human resources employee with EnCana, a Canadian energy company that is drilling in Colorado's Piceance Basin and Wyoming's Jonah Field. Two years ago, she says, after finding hypodermic needles, crank pipes and other drug paraphernalia at one of its worksites, EnCana began working with Shell and Stone Energy to collect and share drug tests from every employee seeking work with the hundreds of sub-contractors that do the digging, drilling and maintenance.

The results are somewhat heartening, according to Colin Woods, director of sales for Houston-based Data, Integrity, Security, Administration, Inc. In 2003, Woods helped set up the test database for Shell and EnCana. Back then, he says, drug positives among oil and gas workers in the Rockies were hovering around 8 to 10 percent. Today, positives have dropped to roughly 4 percent. In contrast, about 8 percent of the nation's full-time workers tested positive for illegal drugs in 2004, according to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

But some local drug testers say the industry's drug problem is much bigger than the numbers suggest. Many oil and gas workers refuse to give urine samples for drug tests because they know they'll fail, says Rick Schneider, treasurer of Sideline Collections, a testing company based in Rock Springs, Wyo. Factor in the refusals, he says, and as many as one in six of the more than 15,000 tests his company collects each year are failures. Many more may be slipping through the cracks; Peck claims to have cheated five or six random urine analysis tests by chugging an herbal detox drink beforehand.

Schneider says he has found entire rig crews unable to pass a drug test. Some energy companies, he says, have asked him to test only on certain days, so workers have plenty of time to back off the drug, which stays in the system for only one to three days. Firing a crew can be costly to an operator facing stiff penalties for straying from a drilling schedule, Schneider explains: "It is an incentive for a company to look the other way."

Locals left holding the bag

The recent survey from the National Association of Counties shed stark light on the meth problem. Shortly after it was released, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales urged a national drug policy shift from marijuana to methamphetamine. A number of bills aimed at stemming the problem are floating around Congress, including the "Combat Meth Act" sponsored by Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo. The bill could provide as much as \$16 million for law enforcement and rehabilitation, especially in rural areas, but it is languishing on the congressional calendar.

In the meantime, Moffat County residents have formed their own grassroots task force: Communities Overcoming Meth Addiction, or COMA. Roughly a year old, COMA offers classes and support groups. The all-volunteer group is pushing for an inpatient rehabilitation center at Craig Memorial Hospital; patients currently travel 200 miles to Grand

Junction to reach the nearest facility. The group, with support from District Attorney Roesink, Sheriff Grinstead and District Judge Michael O'Hara, also wants to open a drug court. Used with some success around the country since the mid-1990s, drug courts sentence offenders to lengthy rehab and drug treatment, with the threat of a return to jail or prison for drug-use relapses.

"I've seen our community and other communities deal with this in a traditional way, and it's gotten us nowhere," says Grinstead. "We want to put these people in jail, but we've got to deal with the abuse, too."

But with limited resources, it is hard to battle the drug head-on. COMA's bank balance barely topped \$3,000 in August. Moffat County has a \$45 million annual budget, and puts some money into drug enforcement, including the jail and the sheriff's division. But there is no rehab program, nor money to pay for it, despite the steady increase in energy business in the area.

County Commissioner Darryl Steele says oil and gas money will start to trickle in over the next two years, but the federal and state governments will have to pay for any additional rehab programs.

As for Sheriff Grinstead's original request that oil and gas companies be required to randomly test their workers, it's unlikely to come to fruition. But companies such as Entraga and El Paso, which are both building pipelines through Craig this fall, are listening. Both require drug tests before they will hand out applications for the 600 temporary positions they need to fill.

That's music to Grinstead's ears. He just wants "everybody to get involved with testing so that there is no place for these guys (doing meth) to work."

The author is a former HCN intern.

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