

DEA clamps down on synthetic drugs

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Federal authorities moved Wednesday to outlaw three chemicals found in so-called bath salts, a group of synthetic drugs that emerged as a significant public health threat over the past year and have been linked to several deaths and thousands of calls to poison control centers.

Meanwhile, in another sign that the abuse of such drugs is a growing national issue, White House "drug czar" Gil Kerlikowske convened what his office described as a "significant" meeting Wednesday of high-level representatives of 10 federal agencies to address what can be done to "disrupt the production, importation, sale, and use of synthetic drugs."

"These products are harmful and appear to have become increasingly popular, particularly among teens and young adults," Kerlikowske said.

In an interview after the meeting, Kerlikowske warned that the federal government can't handle the problem by itself. He told the Star Tribune that state governments may be able to move "more quickly" and "more effectively than the federal government in this area."

The chemicals in bath salts have been banned in more than 30 states, but the products remain widely available from online sellers, based on a continuing Star Tribune investigation into the business.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) said it would use its emergency authority as early as a month from now to temporarily ban the three stimulants, which have shown up in colorfully packaged products with names such as Ivory Wave, Vanilla Sky and Bliss.

The DEA's move drew support from other federal officials, as well as local prosecutors, who have been trying to find ways to combat the growing menace posed by synthetic drugs.

"Bath salts have a similar effect on the body as cocaine and methamphetamine and have resulted in numerous reports of individuals acting violently, leading to deaths or injuries to themselves or others," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who is trying to pass federal legislation that would outlaw nine chemicals used to make synthetic drugs.

Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom said he hopes the DEA's action will make it easier for authorities to target out-of-state websites that sell illegal products to Minnesotans.

"This classification sends a clear message about the danger of these synthetic drugs, and we all hope t his message will act as a deterrent," Backstrom said. "This is a growing problem across our state and nation, and we need all the tools we can get."

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It is the second time in less than a year that the DEA has tried to use its emergency authority to ban chemicals used to make synthetic drugs.

In March, the agency outlawed five chemicals in synthetic marijuana. The move, however, did not appear to curb availability. The Star Tribune investigation showed that synthetic pot remained widely available after the ban was announced, with manufacturers using other chemicals that were not specifically targeted.

In a previous interview, DEA spokesman Rusty Payne said it is "ridiculous" to think the federal government can stop the trafficking of all synthetic drugs, noting that there are thousands of websites peddling the products.

There also have been few prosecutions under the federal analog act, which forbids the sale or use of chemicals that mimic the effects of controlled substances if they are intended for human consumption.

On Wednesday, Payne said federal agents are using the agency's ban on five synthetic pot substances to pursue criminal cases in Louisiana and elsewhere. He said he also expects more prosecutions to come under the analog law.

The three stimulants covered by the proposed DEA ban are mephedrone, methylone and 3,4-methylenedioxypyrovalerone, better known as MDPV. Nine bath salts purchased by the Star Tribune this year contained MDPV, based on lab testing

conducted on the newspaper's behalf. Concentration levels of MDPV ranged from 2 to 36 percent.

Drug experts said the newspaper's research shows that synthetic drugs are dangerously unpredictable, greatly increasing the chance of dying from an accidental overdose.

Cody Wiberg, executive director of the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy, said the DEA's ban could discourage some people from using bath salts.

"One reason these products had appeal for users was that they were supposedly 'legal,'" Wiberg said. "At least some users will now conclude that using these products is not worth the risk of being prosecuted."

The DEA's emergency temporary order would remain in effect for at least 12 months, with the possibility of a six-month extension. Meanwhile, the federal government would study whether to make the chemicals illegal permanently.

Jim Carlson, owner of Last Place on Earth, a Duluth shop that has been one of the state's leading sellers of synthetic drugs, said he doesn't think the ban will make it difficult to continue selling the items. He said his suppliers have a variety of chemical compounds that aren't specifically forbidden by either Minnesota or the federal government.

"We don't have those ingredients in it, so it won't affect our sales," Carlson said. "They just keep

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adding stuff left and right. Pretty soon they'll be trying to protect people from caffeine."

In his interview with the Star Tribune, the nation's drug czar said that the criminal justice system isn't the only way to deal with the problem of synthetic drugs. He said his office will also push hard on education and prevention.

To discourage teenagers and others from using synthetic drugs, Kerlikowske said, parents should discuss the dangers with their children and learn how to spot risk factors that can lead to drug use, such as academic problems or poor classroom behavior.

Staff writer Jeremy Herb contributed to this report.

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