

Print Page

MONDAY MAY 19, 2008 :: Last modified: Tuesday, February 27, 2007 1:54 AM MST

## House keeps meth lab cleanup costs with landlords

By JARED MILLER

Star-Tribune capital bureau

CHEYENNE -- As part of its effort to craft clandestine methamphetamine lab cleanup standards, the state House Monday grappled with the question of who should shoulder the cost.

The standards would shield homeowners from liability lawsuits and protect future property owners and tenants from exposure to potentially dangerous chemicals, according to supporters of the bill.

Rep. Mark Semlek, R-Moorcroft, introduced an amendment to Senate File 152 that would have lifted the financial burden from landlords, whom he called unwitting "victims." But Rep. Kevin White, R-Laramie, said that would shift the cost to cities, towns and counties.

"That is very expensive," said White, noting that cleanup of a meth lab can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

The House defeated the amendment after a lengthy debate, in which Rep. Colin Simpson, R-Cody, said vague wording might absolve illegal drug makers from paying any portion of the cleanup costs.

Semlek promised to redraft the amendment and present it again when the House considers the bill again, possibly today.

Rep. Timothy Hallinan, R-Gillette, said the law might encourage property owners to keep quiet about meth labs if landlords are not protected.

Rep. Amy Edmonds, R-Cheyenne, said the bill would "make our private property owners basically criminals themselves.

"That's not palatable to me," she said.

But Rep. Pete Illoway, R-Cheyenne, said the state must send a strong message to landlords and property owners to clean up meth labs. He also said the rights of landlords should not trump the rights of their neighbors.

"We have people who could care less about these properties and don't clean them up," he said.

"Just one lawsuit of someone being injured on a property with these toxic chemicals would be far more costly than the cost of cleanup," added Rep. Sandra Meyer, D-Evanston, one of the bill's sponsors.

Rep. Floyd Esquibel, D-Cheyenne, said the Legislature should be careful about providing handouts for residents and businesses that are victims of crimes.

"To what extent should the state of Wyoming or government assist someone who has been the victim of illegal activity?" said Esquibel, who questioned whether the state should reimburse a company whose bookkeeper steals money.

Wyoming has no standards for cleanup of meth labs, which can contain toxic and potentially dangerous chemicals, Meyer said.

Senate File 152 would require the state Emergency Response Commission to establish cleanup rules and sets a 90-day timetable for remediation. Law enforcement would be able to seize properties that are not cleaned up and charge the owners for cleanup costs.

Property owners who comply would be protected from lawsuits by future owners or tenants claiming health problems caused by chemicals related to the production of meth.

Once numbering in the dozens, clandestine meth lab busts in Wyoming are down to three to five a year, according to Sen. Bob Fecht, R-Cheyenne, the bill's primary sponsor. The number fell sharply after the Legislature regulated the sale of meth "precursor" chemicals found in some over-the-counter cold medications, lawmakers said.