

Meth trade finds new portal: eBay

Drug war | The Web site says it may ban pseudoephedrine auctions as police investigate several sales out of Portland

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Federal and state authorities said Friday they are investigating eBay sales of

products containing pseudoephedrine out of Portland.

At least 10 auctions discovered at the online auction site Thursday and Friday by two sellers offered thousands of pills, far exceeding new state laws on sales of the chemical used to make methamphetamine.

Three auctions continued to take bids Friday. Three other auctions Thursday that described open bidding through the

weekend could not be found Friday, but it was unclear whether eBay or the sellers ended them.

Ken Magee, assistant special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Oregon, was not aware of the auctions when asked Thursday. On Friday, Magee said an investigation had been launched and that the eBay auctions "piqued our interest tremendously."

Capt. Craig Durbin of the Oregon State Police said, "We know it's a problem," and that illegal buyers of pseudoephedrine "need to know that law enforcement will track them down."

The pseudoephedrine auctions illustrate the evolution of the meth epidemic — and the problems that law enforcement faces in stopping its production. With Oregon and other states passing

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laws restricting the sale of pseudoephedrine in recent months, buyers and sellers of the chemical are finding new ways to obtain it, officials said.

"Crooks are becoming more savvy," said Garrison Courtney, a spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Administration in Washington, D.C. "They're realizing, 'Hey, here's a way to go through a key-board anonymously, make cash and disappear.'"

For at least six months, the DEA has worked with Silicon Valley-based eBay and other online retailers to stop illicit sales of pseudoephedrine, Courtney said. The retailers are trying to develop filters to root out illegal sales while allowing legal ones, he said.

But trying to find criminals in a marketplace featuring tens of millions of listings is difficult, eBay officials said.

"It's impossible for us to police that and be 100 percent effective," said Hani Durzy, an eBay spokesman.

As a result, he said, eBay may soon revamp its policy to forbid all sales of pseudoephedrine. An announcement may come "very soon," he said.

Until then, the company has yanked individual pseudoephedrine auctions if asked by authorities pursuing investigations, Durzy said. He did not know how many auctions the company had ended.

A Tennessee-based blogger tracking the topic on a Web site called pseudoactivist.blogspot.com said that eBay has removed at least 40 auctions involving 500 grams of pseudoephedrine after e-mails urging the company to do so.

Rules approved in April by the Oregon Board of Pharmacy restrict cold medicine purchasers to 9 grams of active pseudoephedrine a month — about the amount in three 24-pill boxes of Sudafed.

As of late Friday afternoon, eBay listed at least three auctions for boxes of pseudoephedrine containing 1,000 30-milligram tablets located in Portland. The starting bids were \$65. One auction ended Sunday, and two others are scheduled to end Monday.

The first listing advertised the auction, which began Thursday morning with the headline "Affordable Cold and Allergy Medicine" in all caps. The same listing displayed a different headline Thursday: "Pseudoephedrine By the Box or by the Bottle."

EBay officials would not provide any information Friday about the

sellers or the buyers of the auctions.

The first seller went by the pseudonym standingrocktradingpost. The seller became an eBay member Tuesday and was located somewhere in the United States, according to the auction listing. The pseudoephedrine was located in Portland, the listing said. The seller ended three auctions early Friday for the same product, garnering winning bids of \$122.50, \$79 and \$65.

The second seller went by the pseudonym iliem1. The seller had two auctions listed Thursday — but not Friday — for 1,000 pseudoephedrine tablets with a starting bid of \$79.

Oregon last year became the second state in the country to require that many pseudoephedrine products be kept behind the counter instead of on open shelves. Last month, Gov. Ted Kulongoski signed legislation that will require prescriptions for decongestants containing pseudoephedrine.

The new law says the requirement must be in place no later than next July 1, but officials say they may be able to implement the new restrictions months before that. Under the law, doctors can prescribe the product over the phone, and consumers can get as many as five refills in a six-month period.