

Portland police may fortify pepper spray

Officers propose testing a stronger mixture, saying they need more stopping power with suspects

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Portland police may start testing a new pepper spray this summer that's four times more potent than their current spray -- a 16-year-old concoction that fails to subdue about one-third of the people it's used on.

The existing spray is so ineffective that officers have lost confidence in it and rarely use it, said Lt. Dave Famous of the bureau's training division Monday.

"It's not working," said Famous, adding that the current spray typically needs eight to 10 seconds to take effect.

Within those crucial seconds, suspects can continue to resist arrest and injure officers, Famous said. According to its Missouri-based manufacturer, the new spray, Sabre Red, will stop subjects instantly if sprayed directly into the eyes or within seconds of hitting the face.

Officers from the training division presented the proposal at the Chief's Forum, a gathering of citizens and staff who meet twice a month. Chief Rosie Sizer must approve a three-month pilot program before it takes effect. Sizer said afterward she is leaning toward approving the experiment but wants to mull over what she heard at the Chief's Forum.

With Sizer's OK, the new spray would be used by 14 to 20 defensive tactics instructors throughout the city. They would report back to Sizer on the spray's success at subduing suspects and on any unusually harsh effects it had on civilians or officers.

According to the bureau's training division, many police departments have switched to more potent and fast-acting sprays. Sabre Red is used by police in Boston, Miami, Chicago, Denver and Atlanta. The spray has 2 million Scoville heating units and is made up of 1.33 percent capsaicinoids.

In the metro area, Beaverton police use a spray that's slightly more powerful.

And although Hillsboro and the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office use spray that isn't as strong as Sabre Red, it's still twice as strong as Portland's current spray.

"We're way behind what everyone else is using," said Officer Don Livingston, who's been developing the proposal.

Livingston tested both sprays on himself. He said the new spray worked faster and hurt more -- by blinding his eyes and swelling his mucus membranes. Both sprays wore off after about 45 minutes, with no lasting damage, he said.

Contrary to the artificial agent used in some other sprays, pepper sprays are made from natural products, Livingston said. The active ingredient is a cousin of the cayenne pepper.

"You could eat this," Livingston said of the sprays. "You could spray this on your Thai food."

The new spray would cost \$8 a can, about \$3 cheaper than the existing spray.

Portland police are hoping the new spray will be a "sorely needed" alternative to Tasers, which don't work 10 percent of the time -- usually when subjects are wearing thick, baggy clothes, Livingston said.

Tasers also don't work well in crowds because the weapons can shock only one person at a time. Ideally, police say, pepper spray would be a better alternative because all it needs is face contact to work.

But a two-year study from 2004 to 2006 found that officers were reluctant to use pepper spray -- turning to it in 7 percent of use-of-force incidents. They relied on Tasers nearly three times as often, and their hands or feet twice as often.

Some watchdog groups oppose the proposal to increase the effectiveness of pepper spray, saying it can cause serious injury and that using it in crowds can harm bystanders. Some of the same groups have concerns about Tasers as well.

Dan Handelman, a spokesman for Portland Copwatch, said he's concerned about police upping the potency of pepper spray because he believes the effects haven't been thoroughly studied and understood.

"It's very important to have a community discussion," Handelman said.

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