

# Smoke detectors can be hazardous trash

By Penny Wright  
Special writer

Is your smoke detector dangerous to your health? Yes, says a new publication.

"Michigan Household Hazardous Substance Handbook," written by Janet Senior and Nancy Stone, says that certain detectors containing trace amounts of radioactive materials can pose an environmental hazard when carelessly discarded after use.

According to the authors, smoke detectors come in two types: photoelectric and ionizing.

Ionizing detectors contain a small amount of radioactive Americium-241 in a leakproof metallic foil container. Through normal use and during a fire, the radioactive substance poses no problem.

BUT PROBLEMS can occur after a detector is discarded.

Americium, with a radioactive half-life of 460 years, is water soluble. If improperly discarded, it could eventually enter the human food chain through drinking water, plants, fish and animals.

Published by the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor, the handbook focuses on the dangers of using common household substances: smoke detectors, cleansers, drain cleaners, automotive products, paints, pesticides, and the careless disposal of such materials.

"We've been casual about using and discarding our toxic household products," said Nancy Stone, education coordinator at the Center. "The consequences of this casualness are reflected in the growing number of contaminated sites on our state cleanup list."

STONE HOPES to encourage the use of non-toxic alternatives in the home.

"We have tried to provide a thorough discussion of the problems concerned with using toxics in the home and list alternative products people can use."

"If we start educating people about the dangers of the toxic chemicals they use everyday in their homes, perhaps we will eventually affect toxic chemical usage in com-

## Car makers hit acid rain bill

The environment would benefit little or not at all under a proposed Senate bill to tighten emission standards on motor vehicles.

That's what the head of the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association told a congressional panel in Washington.

The bill seeks to control the pollutants contributing to acid rain.

It demands technology that has not been proven feasible, Thomas H. Hanna, president of MVMA, told the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

"More stringent motor vehicle emission controls are not warranted," Hanna said, noting the more than 90 percent overall reductions that already have been made in automotive emissions.

ONLY 3 PERCENT of the cars tested and no light-duty trucks or heavy-duty gas engines meet all of the standards proposed, Hanna said.

"Because the present levels are so low, the incremental air quality benefits that could be achieved by further tightening are minimal," he said.

"But the task that SB 2203 would impose on manufacturers is enormous — requiring a further reduction of 60-75 percent of emissions from today's low levels for both passenger cars and light trucks," Hanna said.



our land  
**Penny Wright**

mercial and industrial activities as well."

The handbook has some eye-opening statistics.

In Michigan, more than 1,100 sites of groundwater pollution are linked to the mishandling and improper use of hazardous chemicals.

Ordinary households provide a hefty amount of hazardous chemical

wastes. In a city the size of Ann Arbor, with a population of more than 107,000, local households generate approximately 4,600 pounds per year of hazardous materials.

A SUBSTANCE is legally hazardous if it is either flammable, explosive, toxic, caustic or carcinogenic. Antifreeze, gasoline, paints, pesticides and even nail polish are examples of toxic substances.

When hazardous chemicals are discarded with the trash, they end up in sanitary landfills. Most sanitary landfills are not designed to accommodate toxic materials. Over time, the toxics may leak through the ground and threaten drinking water supplies.

The handbook suggests ways a household can properly handle chemical leftovers.

For example, gasoline drained from lawn mowers and boats can be strained through cloth or a paper coffee filter to remove impurities, and stored for future use in a tightly closed well-labeled container. "Dry gas" can be added to remove water. Old medicines should be wrapped in plastic when thrown out in the trash. Antibiotics and other medicines can kill the useful bacteria in sewage treatment plants or septic tanks if flushed down the toilet or sink.

IN ADDITION to proper disposal methods, the handbook lists safer alternatives to toxic household chemicals.

Baking soda is the recommended alternative to cleansers containing caustic (burning or corroding) substances.

Vinegar can be substituted for spot removers and floor. And compounds such as carborates and lemon juice are listed as effective cleaning agents.

"The handbook is geared to the general public as well as public health and community service pro-

fessionals," said Stone. She added that the information is also ideal for libraries and schools. "We are in the process of developing teaching materials for seventh- and eighth-grade classes on household toxics."

Stone predicts the management of hazardous waste generated by households will grow in importance. "It's an area ready to take off."

Copies of the three-ring bound handbook may be ordered by contacting: The Ecology Center of Ann Arbor, 417 Detroit, Ann Arbor 48104. Phone number is 761-3186.

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