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Hazardous Materials Response • Massachusetts Firefighting Academy

Fire Officials Issue Warning on Fire Hazard of DIY Projects *Spontaneous Combustion of Oily Rags Cause of Several Recent Fires*

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan, Watertown Fire Chief Mario Orangio, president of the Fire Chiefs' Association of Massachusetts, Ayer Fire Chief Robert J. Pedrazzi, Belmont Fire Chief David Frizzell, Bourne Fire Chief Martin Greene, Royalston Fire Chief Keith R. Newton, and Waltham Fire Chief Paul J. Ciccone today issued a warning for people engaged in do-it-yourself projects to properly dispose of oily rags used in staining and painting projects.

Spontaneous Combustion of Oily Rags

Do-it-yourself projects often involve using products with high VOC's (volatile organic compounds), which makes them flammable. Examples of these products are oil-based paints and stains, varnishes and polyurethane, paint thinners, etc. Even cooking oil is a flammable liquid.

"One minute you're making your home better, and a few hours later, you and your family are homeless. Taking the extra time to safely handle the fire hazard that oily rags pose can lead to truly enjoying your hard work," said State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan.

Oily rags have a long history of being a source of fire, because people are not aware that they have the ability to spontaneously combust and catch on fire. Oily rags that get folded or balled up and tossed on the floor have the danger of going through a process that starts with oxidation. As the oil is drying on the rag, it produces heat, and air gets trapped in the folds or balled up portions. Heat and oxygen are combined in addition to the rag, which is usually made of combustible cloth that can become a source of fuel. Heat, oxygen and fuel are all that is needed to create a fire, which is why oily rags that are not disposed of properly can create a fire that people are not prepared for.

How to Dispose of Oily Rags

Oil or gas-soaked rags should be safely disposed of after use using two steps: Hang them outside to dry in a safe area or spread them out flat, making sure they are weighted down outdoors. They should not be in a pile. Once they are dry, they should be disposed of properly.

For somebody who uses oily rags on a daily or weekly basis, the oily rags should be placed in a listed oily waste container and emptied by a private contractor.

For a less frequent user, the now dry oily rags should be stored in a small, airtight, non-combustible (such as metal) container with a tight-fitting lid. An old paint can is a good example. The rags should be completely covered with a solution of water and an oil breakdown detergent. Do not add any other combustible material (stuff that can catch fire). The user should then dispose of the rags during a city-sponsored hazardous waste collection day.

For more information, *Disposal of Oily Rags*, under *Fire Safety Topics*, on the DFS website – <http://www.mass.gov/dfs>

Recent Fires

The most recent fire happened early in the morning of June 19, 2012 on Main Street in **Ayer**. A new business was renovating a space and earlier in the evening a staining project had taken place. Spontaneous combustion of the oily rags caused the fire several hours later that displaced another business and nine people living in apartments above.

On June 11, 2012, there was fire on Evergreen Avenue in **Waltham** that caused significant damage to the one-family home. The cause was spontaneous combustion of oily rags in a bag, soaked in cooking oil from a restaurant.

On June 9, 2012 at 4 a.m., there was a fire in a commercial structure on Benjamin Circle in **Bourne**. Fortunately there were no injuries and damage was minimal. The cause was spontaneous combustion of linseed soaked rags.

On June 1, 2012, there was 3-alarm fire at beautiful home undergoing renovation on Clover Street in **Belmont**. The damage was significant destroying all the renovation work that had been done. The owners were just about to move back in and the floors had just been refinished. The spontaneous combustion of oily rags caused the fire.

On May 31, 2012 on Athol-Richmond Road in **Royalston**, oily rags stored on a screen porch attached to the barn spontaneously combusted. The barn was destroyed but fortunately the house was not. A deck-staining project took place earlier in the day.