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How do I dispose of aerosol cans?

Aerosol cans are used to disperse a variety of chemicals, including paint, lubricants and cleaners. Although aerosol cans are commonplace, they are often mishandled. Below is a description of how to properly dispose of empty and non-empty aerosol cans.

Hazards

Aerosol containers use propane, a flammable gas, as the propellant to pressurize the container. The product in the can is also sometimes flammable, increasing the hazard. This is why aerosol containers should not be used near open flames. As the can is "sprayed", it is releasing the propane as well as the product. By releasing the propane, especially in closed areas, enough propane could be released to create a flammable atmosphere, and resulting in an explosion if an ignition source is found. Since the aerosol cans contain a pressurized gas, there is also the possibility that if the can is heated it could explode from the pressure of the expanding gas. Aerosol cans should be stored at room temperature to avoid this.

Prior to 1976, the most common propellants were chlorofluorocarbons, or CFC's. CFC's are an extremely potent greenhouse gas, and were subsequently banned by the federal government in 1976 from use in aerosol cans, along with use in foam and other products. Therefore, it is may be confusing to find that many aerosol cans still have on their label, "Does Not Contain CFC's".

Managing Supplies

The best way to reduce aerosol can disposal is to manage supplies: buy only what is needed and try to avoid buying large quantities just because of a good price break. When buying aerosol spray paint, if possible buy latex paint. Latex paint is more environmentally friendly as it is easier to cleanup (with soap and water), as compared to oil based paint, which requires paint thinner or mineral spirits which also adds to cleanup costs. Paint thinner and mineral spirits are also flammable, increasing the hazard.

Recycling

A simple way to "recycle" unused aerosol cans is to determine if anyone else in the department or neighboring areas can use the product before disposal. It is preferable to try to "use up" materials before disposing of them.

Disposal

Empty aerosol containers, those that are devoid of any remaining product, can be placed into the normal trash for disposal. If the container has product remaining, it should be disposed of through EH&S. Fill out the chemical waste pickup request form, available on the EH&S website, www.ehs.psu.edu, under Waste Disposal.