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Contact: David Jeffers/Kimon Koulet
Lakes Region Planning Commission
(603) 279-8171

Reduce the Use of Hazardous Household Products

Here in the Lakes Region, we have much to be thankful for in terms of a healthy environment. Maintaining environmental quality requires personal and community responsibility. Products that we use in our homes and yards can have significant impacts on our local environment. Most homes contain several common household goods that are considered a hazard to the environment if disposed of improperly. Look under the sink, in the garage, or in the basement; you will likely see products such as oven cleaner, drain opener, hair spray, paint thinner, pesticides, or pool chemicals. These products and others are considered hazardous because they contain chemicals that are corrosive, explosive, flammable, or toxic.

If improperly stored or discarded, these products can damage our local environment. Pouring them on the ground or washing them down the sink does not make them go away. Municipal treatment plants and leach fields are incapable of processing certain chemicals. Landfill disposal poses many risks to people and the environment. In each case, the chemicals can leach out and contaminate our groundwater, upon which everyone is dependent.

There are several steps that the homeowner can take to reduce the threat to the Lakes Region environment from hazardous household products: seek alternative products, use up what you have, and properly dispose of the unused product.

This article is designed to address three methods for reducing your impact on the Lakes Region through the thoughtful use and disposal of hazardous household products. As mentioned above, using alternative products is the first step to reducing your “environmental impact”; if hazardous products are not purchased, then there is less toxic waste in the region.

Metal, porcelain, window, and multi-purpose cleaners as well as silver and furniture polishes can all be made from basic household products such as vinegar, ammonia, vegetable oil, and lemon juice.

For example, an all-purpose cleaner can be made by mixing two tablespoons of baking soda with one pint of warm water in a spray bottle. To cut grease, add a squeeze of lemon juice or a splash of vinegar. A list of other substitutes can be found at the NH Department of Environmental Services' HHW website: <http://des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/p2au/pps/hhwp/alternative.htm>.

With rising food costs, many Lakes Region residents are planting flower and vegetable gardens. Depending upon the characteristics of their lawn or garden, homeowners may be able to use substitutes for some of their fertilizers and pesticides. The NH branch of the US Natural Resources Conservation Service has a number of informational flyers on yard and garden conservation, including topics such as mulching, composting, and nutrient management http://www.nh.nrcs.usda.gov/features/Backyard_Conservation/backyard.html. These practices can reduce the need to fertilize. NH DES and UNH Cooperative Extension also recommend a five step process called "Integrated Pest Management" to control pests in your garden and lawn. The five steps are: identify the pest problem, decide how much pest control is necessary, prevent pests, choose the least toxic solution, and evaluate the results. More details on this program may be found at <http://des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/p2au/pps/hhwp/pests.htm> or <http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/AGPMP/PMP/IPM.htm>. Purchasing fewer hazardous products will lead to a reduction in the need for disposal.

All Lakes Region residents are urged to use alternatives to hazardous household products. If, however, you do have some toxic materials in your home or garage that you need to discard, a solution does exist. By pooling state, regional, and local resources, two dozen Lakes Region communities are offering safe, efficient, and effective household hazardous waste (HHW) collections through the Lakes Region Planning Commission (LRPC). This year's HHW collections will occur on Saturday, July 31 and Saturday, August 7. More information on these collections can be found at http://www.lakesrpc.org/services_hhw.asp.