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Opinion: Dangerous wildfire air shows need to detoxify carpets



Many of these structures were filled with carpets that contain hazardous chemicals



(Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

The Camp Fire smoke covers the Butte Creek on Honey Run Road in Paradise on Nov. 9, 2018.

By **JEFF GEARHART** and **MONICA WILSON** |

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The unprecedented wildfires that devastated California last year resulted in some of the most toxic air ever recorded. Nearly 20,000 buildings and homes were destroyed by the Butte County Camp Fire alone.

Recent research identified 44 highly toxic chemicals in carpets that we daily inhale into our lungs and absorb through our skin. These carpets are used in homes, offices and schools, making them less healthy places to live, work, study and play.

Children are particularly vulnerable because their brains and reproductive organs are still developing, they spend more time on the floor and air pollution is particularly harmful to infants.

Then, when carpet materials burn, as they did in record numbers last year, the combustion of hazardous chemicals increases the toxicity of the air we breathe. Further, the fire and smoke that firefighters are exposed to becomes more toxic, which has been linked to higher risks of cancer among our first responders.

Finally, there's the problem of disposal. Over 4 billion pounds of carpet are annually dumped in American landfills or burned in incinerators – releasing deadly pollutants into the air, soil and water. In 2017, California discarded 338 million pounds of carpet. Only 14 percent of this was recycled, and the remaining waste was incinerated, buried in California landfills or exported – exposing surrounding communities to dangerous particulates and toxic chemicals.

Because carpet production, use and disposal are projected to grow, it will continue to have major repercussions for human health and the environment.

In recognition of the growing public health threat posed by carpets and their disposal, Gov. Jerry Brown last year signed a groundbreaking law mandating manufacturers double the rate of carpet recycling by 2020.

San Francisco banned the internal purchasing of carpets and furniture containing a variety of toxic chemicals. And Home Depot banned numerous toxic chemicals from the carpets it sells.

While recycling carpet reduces waste and harmful emissions, the toxic chemicals added to carpet make recycling them particularly difficult. Protecting public health while achieving the desired recycling rates, particularly those just mandated in California, will also require less use of toxic chemicals.

Unfortunately, with the carpet industry delivering underwhelming recycling rates and continuing to sell carpets with toxic additives, much more aggressive action is needed.

A report just released by the Ecology Center, Global Alliance for Incinerator

The toxic chemicals detected (many in products advertised as “environmentally-friendly”) have been linked to cancer, hormone disruption, respiratory disease, heart attacks, strokes, asthma, and immune and developmental health problems in children.

European carpet manufacturers fared much better than their U.S. counterparts. In a similar study of 15 carpets sold on the European market, three of the carpets contained none of these toxic substances.

Among the toxic chemicals are Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) used in carpet to prevent stains. PFAS are a hazardous class of chemicals that persist indefinitely in our bodies and environment and cause health problems that can be passed onto future generations. A growing number of communities’ drinking water has been contaminated by PFAS, which are now found in the blood of 98 percent of Americans.

While the U.S. study detected PFAS in half of the carpets tested, they were found in only one of the European carpets.

The United States must fundamentally transform the carpet industry by banning toxic substances from carpet (as we have in children’s toys) at the local, state and federal level; incentivizing the design of safe and fully recyclable carpets; and requiring manufacturers to disclose all ingredients and additives in carpets to consumers.

Europe has proven this formula works: It boosts recycling rates by creating clean material streams, protects human health and the environment, reduces carbon emissions and saves resources.

Carpet production is projected to grow and climate change will increase the number and intensity of wildfires. Public health and the environment must take precedence over corporate profit. The time to act is now. The clock is ticking.

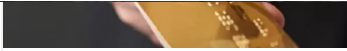
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