Fact Sheet

Air Bag Management

Information for Vehicle Dismantlers

Background

Air bags, also known as supplemental restraint systems (SRS) have been installed in American vehicles for more than 30 years. As the vehicles age, they are taken out of service and processed at vehicle dismantling facilities for recycling.

Most air bag modules contain inflators containing sodium azide for generating the gas that fills the air bag when it deploys in a crash. Undeployed air bags in vehicles destined for recycling may present a safety and environmental hazard when not properly handled. Undeployed air bag may inadvertently deploy when untrained workers dismantle a vehicle. Undeployed air bag modules can also react explosively when exposed to heat in an auto shredder. Because of this, the 2005 Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 2507, which requires that air bags containing sodium azide be deployed or removed from a vehicle before it is wrecked or dismantled. This means that air bags containing sodium azide must be deployed or removed prior to crushing of the vehicle.

What is the concern with Sodium Azide?

Sodium Azide is a toxic substance that is dangerous if inhaled and may burn exposed skin. When mixed with water, sodium azide forms hydrazoic acid that is very toxic and can enter streams, lakes, and groundwater when not properly managed.

For more information on the dangers of sodium azide, search the Center for Disease Control website for sodium azide facts.

Which vehicles have air bags?

Air bags have been required in all passenger automobiles since 1989. Prior to this date, air bags were offered as an option. Look for the words “Supplemental Restraint System”, “Air Bag” or initials such as “SIR”, “SRS” on the steering wheel hub for driver air bags and on the right side of the dashboard for passenger air bags.

For information on air bag location in specific vehicles, contact the Insurance Institute at 703-247-1500 or the vehicle manufacturer.

What should be done with the air bags?

Deployed Air Bags

Fully deployed air bags do not present a risk to human health or the environment. When an air bag is deployed, the chemicals in the inflator undergo a reaction that converts the sodium azide to nitrogen gas. Fully deployed air bags may be left in the car or removed and managed as a solid waste and disposed of in the garbage.

Be aware that even though a wrecked vehicle contains deployed air bags, the vehicle may still contain additional air bag modules that have not fully deployed during a crash.

How do I deploy the air bags?

Air bags may be deployed in or outside of the vehicle. Air bags can be deployed safely by using guidance from the United Sates Council for Automotive Research (USCAR) or using vehicle manufacturer information on air bag management.

Undeployed air bags removed from vehicles

Undeployed air bag modules or air bag inflators containing sodium azide removed from vehicles need to either be deployed within 7 days after they are removed from the vehicle **or** properly stored by a motor vehicle dealer, automobile repair facility, or a dismantler holding a dismantler certificate from the Oregon DMV.

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In addition, a person may not possess more than two undeployed air bags or air bag canisters containing sodium azide that have been removed from a vehicle unless they are a motor vehicle dealer, automobile repair facility or vehicle dismantler holding a dismantler certificate from the Oregon DMV.

Undeployed air bags or inflators removed from vehicles containing sodium azide may be reused or recycled.

After removal, how should the air bags modules and inflators be stored?

Undeployed air bag modules and inflators removed from vehicles must be managed in a manner that prevents them from being accidentally deployed. They should be stored in a cool, dry, and secure area. The Modules should be stored cover side up and not stacked. Store undeployed air bag modules or inflators away from high heat in an area free of oil, grease, detergent or water. For more information on the management of undeployed air bags, search for the Automotive Recyclers Association webpage.

What if I want to dispose of undeployed air bags or inflators?

Undeployed air bags and inflators containing sodium azide **destined for disposal** shall be managed as a reactive hazardous waste prior to disposal. At a minimum, the undeployed air bags and inflators that will be disposed of should be stored in a container labeled "Hazardous Waste -- Undeployed Air Bags."

Specific hazardous waste management requirements will depend on the quantity of hazardous waste generated in a calendar month and the amount of hazardous waste accumulated onsite. For more hazardous waste information, search DEQ's hazardous waste web page.

Seatbelt Pretensioners

Vehicles also can contain seatbelt pretensioners that contain sodium azide. Although seatbelt pretensioners are not required to be deployed or removed under state law, they still present similar safety and environmental hazards.

Vehicle dismantlers are encouraged to deploy or remove undeployed pretensioners when possible. Undeployed seatbelt pretensioners destined for disposal will be a reactive hazardous waste.

Additional air bag information

Additional air bag information is available by searching for the following sites:

- 2005 Oregon Air Bag Legislation HB 2507
- American Automobile Manufacturers Association Guidance
- Environmental Compliance for Automotive Recyclers -- Oregon "Virtual Tour"
- Center for Disease Control – Facts About Sodium Azide

Additional Vehicle Dismantler Information

For additional vehicle dismantler information search for the following sites:

- Oregon DEQ Vehicle Dismantler information
- Oregon DMV Vehicle Dismantler Information
- Washington State Vehicle Recycler Manual
- Environmental Compliance for Automotive Recyclers
- Automotive Recyclers Association

Technical Assistance is Available Hazardous Waste Technical Assistance

Hazardous waste technical assistance is available from DEQ. The assistance is non-regulatory in nature and is available free in the form of on-site visits and telephone consultations. For more information search under DEQ's Hazardous Waste Program webpage for hazardous waste technical assistance.

For more information on Hazardous Waste Management, contact DEQ at 503-229-5696 or visit DEQ's Web site.

Alternative formats

Documents can be provided upon request in an alternate format for individuals with disabilities or in a language other than English for people with limited English skills. To request a document in another format or language, call DEQ in Portland at 503-229-5696, or toll-free in Oregon at 1-800-452-4011 or email deqinfo@deq.state.or.us.