



Loudoun County, Virginia
Department of Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Management

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For Immediate Release:

Two Recent Fires Highlight Dangers Associated With Using Oil Based Products Around the Home

Two recent fires in Philomont and Sterling cause over \$2 million in damages and demonstrate the potential dangers associated with some do-it-yourself projects around the home.

At approximately 9:20pm, Tuesday, June 2nd, fire and rescue units from Philomont, Purcellville, Hamilton, Round Hill and Leesburg were dispatched to 19060 Lincoln Road for a reported barn fire. Due to the rural location of the incident and several reports confirming active fire, a tanker task force was dispatched, bringing additional water supply resources from Philomont, Hamilton and Purcellville.

Upon their arrival, firefighters found a single-story, unoccupied barn with significant smoke and fire visible. The fire quickly extended into an adjacent small stone building and barn, all within close proximity to the main residence which was unoccupied at the time. Due to the severity of the fire and threat of collapse, fire and rescue crews initiated a defensive fire attack. Additional units were dispatched to assist the extended operation, to include tankers from Middleburg and Loudoun Heights, an ambulance, and support units from Leesburg and Brambleton. Firefighters worked diligently to extinguish the fire and kept it from spreading to the main residence and nearby woods. There were no injuries to civilians or public safety personnel. The Loudoun County Fire Marshal's Office has determined the cause of the fire to be accidental, resulting from linseed oil soaked rags that were discarded into a trashcan. The fire caused approximately \$2 million in damages.

The disposal of oil soaked rags was also determined to be the cause of last month's fire in Sterling that temporarily displaced a family of four. In this instance, smoke alarms sounded around 2:00am and alerted the family to what could have been a devastating house fire. There were no injuries although the fire caused \$10,000 in damages.

In addition to highlighting the importance of functional smoke alarms, these incidents demonstrate the significant safety hazards posed by some do-it-yourself projects around the home. Oil-based products and other highly volatile products commonly used for projects include paints, stains, teak oil, linseed oil, varnishes, polyurethane, and paint thinners. When oil and stain soaked rags are not disposed of properly they can become a fire hazard due to their ability to spontaneously combust.



Prevention of spontaneous combustion fires begins with good housekeeping. A clean work area can prevent a fire from spreading and getting bigger by not allowing the fire fuel to burn. In addition, understanding the potential for self-heating of rags soiled with oils such as linseed oil and turpentine is a key step in eliminating these preventable fires.

To properly and safely dispose of oil or gas soaked rags:

- Spread the rags in a single layer flat on the ground/driveway or hang them in a safe area away from combustibles, so heat dissipates while the material cures.
- An oily rag has cured when it becomes hard and brittle. The time it takes to cure can vary considerably depending on humidity, temperature, and the finish.
- Place the dry rags in an airtight metal container with tight-fitting lid, and covered with water and an oil breakdown detergent.
 - Place soiled and used rags inside and then fill the rest the way with water, seal the top and do not open it. This will prevent the oils from oxidizing, and thus keeping the rags from heating up and igniting.
 - The metal can with water is a temporary solution until the rags may be properly removed from the site.
 - Do not add any other combustible material (stuff that can catch fire).
 - The materials can be safely disposed of, in hazardous waste collection sites.
- 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 more information on fire prevention and fire safety, please visit www.loudoun.gov/fire or contact Lisa Braun, Public Education Manager at 571-258-3222.

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