

Highway Patrol's Improper Disposal Behind Eruption

Troopers Unaware Of Procedures For Handling Tear Gas, Agency Says

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A cache of discarded tear gas canisters that sickened four workers at a garbage transfer station was improperly dumped by the Florida Highway Patrol, whose officials were not aware of procedures for handling the hazardous material.

One sanitation worker was briefly hospitalized for eye and throat irritation on Wednesday after an accident at a Solid Waste Authority transfer station in Lantana. Three workers also had minor injuries after their front-end loader uncovered about 100 canisters in a garbage pile.

A cloud of chemical gas erupted from the pile when the loader apparently ruptured several dozen containers. They were empty but had not been scrubbed clean, a standard procedure of disposal, according to Solid Waste Authority officials.

But the Highway Patrol has been tossing its outdated tear gas canisters in Dumpsters for years without scrubbing them, a spokesman said on Thursday. The office was unaware of any safeguards requiring special handling of tear gas.

Canisters were dumped in the trash last week after troopers set them off at an explosives range owned by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. After the gas dissipated, troopers threw what they thought were empty canisters in a Dumpster.

"I keep hearing there are these protocols for dumping tear gas, but we've never heard of any protocols. Who did you hear that from?" asked Lt. Pembroke Burrows, a Highway Patrol spokesman.

"I've been here for 13 years, I've been a trooper for 25 years, and this is the way we've always done it," Burrows said.

Burrows said a Highway Patrol commander heard about the accident on Wednesday and got the word out that his agency was responsible. Still, county emergency officials were surprised to learn that a major police agency did not know how to properly handle tear gas.

"Oh dear, that's not good, is it?" said county Fire-Rescue spokesman Nigel Baker. "They really told you that?"

Though there have been similar incidents with hazardous materials found at landfills, it was the first time anyone could recall finding tear gas, Baker said.

A Solid Waste Authority official said he was just glad other accidents hadn't occurred.

"If they've been doing it that way for years, then I guess we've been very lucky," said Robert S. Madden, assistant director of hazardous waste for the Solid Waste Authority.

"I guess it's just the law of averages," Madden said. "We're going to work with the FHP so they're aware of how to handle this material."

Highway Patrol is also conducting an inquiry into its rules for handling tear gas, Burrows said.

Depending on its chemical makeup, tear gas is not heavily regulated, experts say. There is no marking system that can trace or identify the purchaser of canisters.

In Palm Beach County, protocols for handling the gas are generally well known, said several police officials. But each agency has a different manner of disposing of canisters and unused tear gas.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office **routinely incinerates used canisters** to remove chemical residue, according to Cpl. Johnny Hyde, a Sheriff's Office training instructor. Its incinerator is also used by other municipal police agencies to dispose of outdated canisters.

"The stuff is pretty nasty, so we keep track of all of it," Hyde said. "But we only use one, maybe two canisters for a training session, and we've only had one training session this year."

Canisters are probably used only several times a year in actual police operations, Hyde said.

“One hundred canisters is an awful lot of tear gas _ we'd only use that much in something like the riots you had over in St. Petersburg," said Hyde, referring to racial strife in the city of St. Petersburg, Fla.