WARNING!
Handle Buckets with Care

by Dale Swecker

Five-gallon containers are used throughout industry, mainly to transport bulk quantities of products such as food, paint, cleaning solutions, and construction materials. These sturdy buckets serve their intended user well; they were never intended to be hazardous to small children. Unfortunately, that’s what’s happening.

When emptied of their contents and cleaned up, these straight-sided, open head pails make an ideal container to assist with a variety of household chores such as mopping the floor, washing the car, or soaking clothes. They also pose a drowning threat to toddlers.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), over 100 infants, usually between the ages of 8 and 12 months, have drowned in the last five years after falling into buckets used in the home for everyday household projects. In the vast majority of cases, the bucket involved in the fatality was a nominal five-gallon industrial-type pail containing water or some other liquid. These containers can be purchased unfilled in stores, but most of the buckets found in homes have made their way there for secondary use.

What happens in a typical bucket drowning is that someone is using the bucket containing liquid for a household chore. The bucket is left unattended with a small child nearby. The curious infant toddles or crawls to the bucket, pulls itself up by the rim. The toddler then leans forward to investigate or drops a toy into the liquid, and topples head-first into the rigid con-

The label pictured is being proposed as part of federal legislation to mandate the placement of warning labels on five-gallon buckets. This is the same label that's been used in the Coalition for Container Safety's public awareness campaign over the last two years. Consumers may obtain the warning sticker and brochure on bucket-related drownings by contacting the Coalition at (800) BUCKET-5 — (800) 282-5385.
container. Once in, the child’s weight or strength is insufficient to tip the bucket over. Since the child cannot otherwise free itself, drowning occurs. An infant can drown in even a small amount of liquid within a brief period of time. In most of the documented drowning cases, the attendant had stepped away from the small child for only a short time.

Five-gallon buckets are made to transport products as safely and efficiently as possible. Hence, they do not easily tip which decreases a child’s chances of escape. The deadly combination of an unsupervised, unsuspecting, top heavy toddler in the presence of a sturdy, 14 inch high bucket with liquid in it produces the ingredients for a potential mishap, if not a fatality.

How to deal with this problem has been a key topic with a number of interested parties since the CPSC issued a Safety Alert in July 1989 drawing attention to incidence of infant drownings in buckets. A handful of industry representatives answered the initial calls by the CPSC to address the issue. Out of those early meetings in late 1989 grew the industry’s voluntary Coalition for Container Safety. Over the last two and a half years, the Coalition has sponsored a voluntary warning label and public awareness program.

Coalition members have differing opinions on how best to solve the problem. The joint treatment manufacturers in the gypsum industry, for instance, began labeling in early 1990; within a year, all Gypsum Association member-company fillers of five-gallon containers had affixed warning labels to their buckets voluntarily. However, the gypsum industry accounts for only about two percent of all bucket fillers, which leaves a vast quantity of buckets without warning labels. Many bucket manufacturers and fillers felt that the warning label effort would be ineffective and therefore, favored the public-awareness approach to mitigating the drowning problem. Hence, many more bucket fillers have opted to forego a warning label approach than to follow the gypsum industry’s example.

This lack of voluntary labeling and increasing pressure by consumer groups for stronger action to reduce infant drownings in buckets have prompted proposed mandatory remedies on two legislative fronts. A federal bill (Amendment to H.R. 4706) is expected to be considered by the full House Energy and Commerce Committee soon. The Coalition for Container Safety has worked closely with majority and minority staffs on the language of this bill. In California, the state legislature is considering a similar measure (A.B. 2942). The California bill passed the state Assembly in late May on a 41-30 vote and moves on to the California Senate next.

Industry observers of the mandatory labeling initiatives are increasingly lining up behind a uniform federal standard in order to head off a state-by-state attempt to mandate warning labels on buckets which could result in a variety of labeling standards. If all bucket users and manufacturers had participated in a voluntary labeling program, there would be no need for the federal government to get involved and mandate labels.

ASTM (American Society for Testing Materials) recently formed a Subcommittee of F-15 (Consumer Products) to develop safety standards for open head containers. Three task groups were established: (1) to review CPSC data on infant drownings, (2) to pursue a labeling standard, and (3) to examine performance standards of five-gallon buckets. While a mandatory federal regulation may eventually pre-empt an ASTM voluntary standard on labeling, the task group on performance standards will undoubtedly look at other options to deal with the potential drown-
ing hazard posed by unguarded buckets. One recommendation certain to be considered in this task group is bucket redesign which could pose new problems for bucket users. There is the distinct possibility that a combination of government intrusion and ASTM design standards could force current plastic bucket users to seek alternative containers, such as “bag in a box.”

A consumer group has been searching for congressional sponsors for an amendment to the previously-mentioned federal bill that would require all buckets to be labeled within 60 days after enactment of federal legislation. Additionally, if after 180 days all drownings have not ceased, the buckets would be banned. So far, the group has been unsuccessful.

As efforts continue to go forward among bucket interests, government agencies, consumer groups and other organizations and individuals seeking to eliminate the drowning risk to small children posed by unguarded five-gallon buckets, parents and guardians must also assume a major role. A small child MUST NEVER be left alone with ANY large receptacle containing liquid. All buckets must be emptied immediately upon completion of household chores. Care-givers ONLY can prevent these unnecessary drownings. Parents and guardians must not only stay alert to keep small children away from all buckets, they must alert others who tend their infants, including babysitters, friends, relatives, and neighbors.

In the meantime, drywall contractor employers can be instructed to render all joint treatment compound and similar pails useless by punching a hole in all empty buckets on the job site before they are discarded.

About the Author:
Dale Swecker is Director of Communications for the Gypsum Association, Washington, D.C. He joined the association following a 23-year stint with the Maryland State Department of Education, where he held administrative positions in the private and public sectors. Prior to that he worked in the Montgomery County, Maryland public school system and as a newspaper reporter.