

## **HAZMAT and the Law**

Hazmat incidents are always serious. They vary in scope, and once they go beyond the personal level, they must be dealt with by professionally trained individuals and teams so that persons, animals, and the environment are minimally affected. On the whole, animal care professionals (veterinarians, veterinary technicians, farmers, and feed and accessory vendors) are capable or qualified only to deal with the materials they routinely use in their workplaces. Animal care professionals are generally not trained or qualified to deal with unknown hazardous materials because they are not licensed to deal with them. In contrast, many farmers are familiar with the appropriate methods for handling commonly used hazardous materials, such as herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers. This professional approach to dealing with hazardous materials is very different from the understanding of the general public, who need a broader understanding of what hazardous materials are and how to deal with them.

In 1986 the U.S. Congress passed the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act. This legislation makes it mandatory for local emergency planning committees and employers to prepare an emergency plan for possible releases of hazardous substances and for fixed facilities to cooperate in this planning process. This legislation also dictates that the emergency response plan, material safety data sheet, inventory form, toxic chemical release form, and follow-up emergency procedures be made publicly available. In many communities the right-to-know acts are more demanding than the federal law. Local law takes precedence over federal law.

Because of the high risk of acute and long-term consequences of human exposure, injury, and death and the threat of a deleterious impact on the environment, specialized training and knowledge are necessary before accepting responsibility for making decisions on hazardous materials.

For professional hazmat personnel the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) conducts technical and environmental training programs related to hazardous materials and chairs the 14-agency National Response Team (NRT). At the request of community officials the EPA can provide technical expertise on the full range of environmental contamination issues. Other sources of hazmat information are local fire departments, EMAs, and cooperative extension services.