

Airbag Handling and Disposal, An International Explosive Safety Issue

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Christchurch, New Zealand Auto recycling and dismantling is a large and growing business in most modern countries. In New Zealand alone, it is estimated that 30,000 vehicles are scrapped or crushed each year for recycling purposes. Approximately 20 percent of those vehicles contain air bags with live energetic loaded cartridge actuated devices (CADs). Although safe guards, such as removing batteries from vehicles prior to dismantling, are effective in stopping electronic initiated CADs from functioning during the dismantling process, there are no standard regulations regarding how to safely dispose of airbags once they are out of the vehicles.

The issue came to the fore-front when an auto recycler dropped off over 60 live air bags to an EOD unit in Christchurch for disposal. Although no injuries were reported, the incident sparked discussions between New Zealand Defence Department officials and Land Transport New Zealand officials to determine if rules regarding the handling and disposal of airbags needs to be updated. Other countries such as the U.S. and U.K. do not have any standards in place for the proper handling and disposal of airbags at auto recycling facilities. This International problem is only expected to grow and car manufacturers continue to put more and more airbags into vehicles (e.g., side impact airbags, front airbags, rear passenger airbags).