

Green Economics

Could your perfume be hurting you?

There could be serious environmental risks associated with indoor exposure to toxins from artificial fragrances.



Pipettes used to mix different fragrances while creating a perfume or cologne. Las Vegas declared Wednesday a no-fragrance day.

Mark Thomson / The Christian Science Monitor / File

By Matthew E. Kahn, Guest blogger / May 28, 2010

Recently, I've been thinking about the health impacts caused by exposure to various chemicals. While not revisiting Woodstock or other hippie arenas, I would like to know the answers to some deep "perception versus reality" questions. For common products such as perfumes or toilet cleaners, what chemicals do they actually have in them? What is their "secret sauce"? Such facts would be the cold reality --- now perceptions are key here. For the typical person who uses these products --- do we perceive these products to be safe and having zero risk from exposure? If your answer is yes, what laws and regulations or market forces "guarantee" this happy outcome?



Matthew Kahn

Mathew is an economics Professor at UCLA and has written two books: *Green Cities* (Brookings Institution Press) and *Heroes and Cowards* (Princeton University Press joint with Dora L. Costa).

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Could your perfume be hurting you?

Las Vegas has just run an interesting social experiment that is described in the *New York Times* [here](#) .

"One thing that Las Vegas never lacks is scent. Perfumed hallways, the aroma of waffles wafting off the buffet, the certain je ne sais smell of a casino at 2 a.m. — Vegas has it.

And so perhaps the city is an odd choice for a fragrance-free day, as it proclaimed for Wednesday, in the hopes that perfume, hairspray, body oil and their ilk shall be banished from the land, in honor of Indoor Air Quality Awareness Day.

Councilwoman Lois Tarkanian said she was influenced in calling for the proclamation by information from the National Toxic Encephalopathy Foundation, a

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group based in Las Vegas that lobbies on behalf of people with brain injuries caused by chemicals. "We are asking people not to wear perfume," Ms. Tarkanian said. She would like people and businesses to use vinegar instead of some cleaning supplies. "I thought this might be interesting," she said, "so we will try to go scent-free for that day and see if differences occur." "

NOW, one day is not a revolution --- but it should alert people to how in aggregate their small choices over perfumes and body lotions add up. Indoor air pollution is a major problem in the developing world. Kirk Smith of UC Berkeley has been a leader on documenting the health costs caused by cooking with coal inside and the millions of rural poor who have died.

But, in a rich country such as ours --- is there a serious environmental externality associated with indoor exposure to toxics? There certainly could be. If we care about this problem, then experimentation such as what is going on in Las Vegas is the right way to begin to explore cause and effect or at least to alert people to how much better their day to day quality of life could be if ditch the status quo.

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