

Disasters: Preventing and Coping

"I have a problem and I hope you can help. A couple of weeks ago my water heater leaked, and some of the water evidently soaked some books I'd been storing in the utility room in boxes. Some of the books are moldy and the others have an odor, and I'd like to know if there's some sort of spray or powder or something I can use on them."

The State Archives Preservation Officer responds to this plea regularly from individuals and libraries.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Whoever coined that expression probably was not talking about wet papers, but it certainly applies. Preventing damage is always easier than coping with soggy books, papers and photographs, and prevention does not mean expensive devices or extensive labor. Calling two weeks after the damage precludes an effective response- mold is established, papers are stuck together, photographs are ruined, and bindings have been destroyed.

Before Disaster Strikes: How To Help Prevent Damage

Do not store materials directly on the floor. The person in the story would not have had to call for help if he had put the boxes of books on a raised surface such as a shelf or even a pallet before disaster struck. Getting things only a few inches above the floor is usually adequate. If you have five feet of water in your book stacks or living room, rescuing your collection will probably be down on your list of priorities!

If an area is prone to leaks after storms or is near a water pipe, store materials somewhere else. Is the storage area beneath an upstairs restroom? If a leak is possible, it will probably occur.

Make sure that windows are sealed properly. Weather stripping not only prevents rain from entering, it also saves on heating and cooling costs. Duct tape makes an effective, if unsightly, patch.

Make sure that your electrical system, lights and appliances are in good working order. Do not convert a two-plug outlet into a six-plug outlet with little plastic adapters- they are electrical hazards. If extra outlets are necessary, surge suppressors, often used with computers, offer a safer alternative.

Know what your insurance carrier will and will not cover. You may treasure a run of Arizona Highways, but your carrier may classify them as expendable. It's better to know before disaster strikes, than to discover afterwards that your insurance will not pay as you had assumed.

Set some salvage priorities before you are faced with a room of wet materials. Although everything may be important to you, some items are more important than others. Only you can make that decision. It's better to make those choices when you have time, rather than during a panicked response.

While setting salvage priorities, make a list of your most valuable possessions. Monetary value does not have to be the only criteria. A treasure may be almost entirely without monetary value and still be cherished by you and your family. Consider storing such items together in the safest place available.

Libraries and institutions should prepare written disaster prevention and response plans. The Preservation Officer at the State Archives provides assistance in drafting such plans.

After Disaster Strikes

Do not wait for ten days to seek help! In most cases, wet materials must be stabilized within 72 hours. After that period, permanent damage is probable and total loss becomes a serious threat. If you cannot find a knowledgeable person locally, the Preservation Officer is available for consultations.

Removing the Odor

In response to the question at the beginning, there are no magic sprays or powders. Although visible mold may be cleaned from dry materials, permanent stains and structural damage usually occur. Mold-damaged materials will always be prone to additional infestation, so they must be maintained in relatively dry areas.

Bad odors, on the other hand, may be eliminated or greatly reduced by sealing materials in an airtight enclosure with baking soda or unscented kitty litter. Materials must be dry or they will develop mold. The container may be anything from a clean oven to a cardboard box or non-working refrigerator. After fanning books open and setting them in the container, set a dish or plate of odor-absorbing material in the bottom of the enclosure and seal it up or close the door for several days. Odors will be absorbed by the baking soda or kitty litter. Individual documents may be treated similarly.