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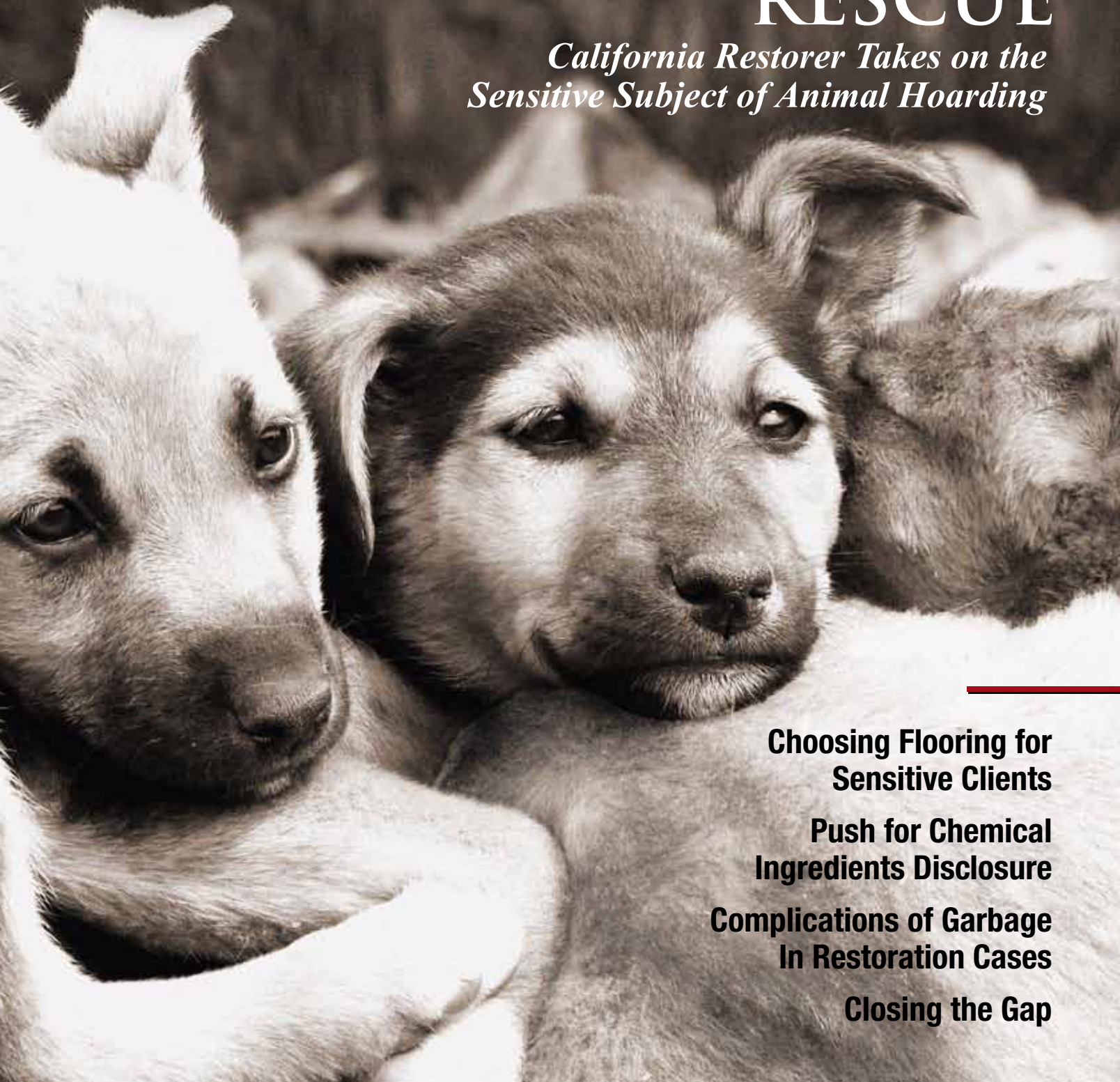
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RESTORATION RESCUE

*California Restorer Takes on the
Sensitive Subject of Animal Hoarding*



**Choosing Flooring for
Sensitive Clients**

**Push for Chemical
Ingredients Disclosure**

**Complications of Garbage
In Restoration Cases**

Closing the Gap

By Michael A. Pinto, CSP, CMP

The Complications of Garbage in Remediation and Restoration Cases



Over the past few years, a cable television show that portrays families and contractors dealing with people who have a compulsive disorder known as “hoarding” has gained popularity. The program focuses on individuals who have difficulty disposing of possessions or even maintaining hygiene levels that are considered normal in North America.

Although it may make for interesting television viewing, such behavior and the conditions that it creates cause complications for restoration contractors on a daily basis.

Whether the response is due to a fire, water loss or mold contamination project, the presence of large quantities of material that most professionals would consider debris—yet are cherished by the homeowners—adds an extra level of complexity to already difficult projects.



Photograph 1

Technical feasibility of decontamination, proper evaluation of the materials and estimates of the cleaning costs are all magnified when excessive accumulations are present. For example, which items in **Photograph 1** need to be saved? The old vacuum with mold on the fabric collection bag? The small wooden table with one broken leg? The bag of used Christmas wrapping paper? The dented Rubbermaid container? Does it make a difference that there is visible black mold on the walls, meaning that most of the items in the photo would have to be decontaminated to be saved?

Physical Dangers

Large quantities of debris at a remediation or restoration site pose both short-term and long-term dangers to the workers involved in the project. Perhaps the greatest danger lies in water loss situations or where water has been used to extinguish a fire and the debris has become saturated. The extra mass puts workers



Photograph 2

at risk for back injuries and other musculoskeletal problems when trying to package and move what can easily become tons of weight.

The problem is compounded because the rubbish impacts travel paths, hides tripping hazards and is slippery. Water oozing from stacked items also makes footing treacherous as restoration workers try to clear the clutter. Slip-resistant safety shoes or boots are the minimum personal protective equipment that should be used. Some situations may require calf-high water-resistant boots with safety tread. **Photographs 2 and 3** graphically illustrate



Photograph 3

some of the problems related to lifting and walking in such environments.

Unfortunately, excessive debris often hides more than just water. Sharp edges of metal cans, broken glass, rusty knives, and even seemingly inoffensive items such as staples from cardboard boxes can cause a serious injury in an instant. Of course, any break in the skin has to be considered serious because of the biological contaminants that



Photograph 4

may be harbored in the mess. Cut-resistant gloves should be mandatory in all such pack-outs.

Physical hazards can also come in the form of items that look innocuous. **Photograph 4** shows some of the garbage encountered by a contractor doing a meth lab cleanup. The portable propane tanks can pose a serious safety risk as meth cooks often use them to hold stolen anhydrous ammonia. Putting this liquid fertilizer in vessels designed for propane can result in dangerous reactions as well as slow deterioration of the valves or shell, resulting in unexpected ruptures. Real caution must be used in such situations since even careful handling can result in an explosion.

An equal number of hazards arise from what often lives in the debris. Mice, snakes, rats, squirrels, scorpions, spiders, chipmunks, raccoons and even skunks have been reported in houses filled with hoarded treasures. Often the preponderance of stuff makes it impossible to see where the integrity of the walls has been breached by wild critters. Bites, stings and spray are all possible hazards when moving materials that have been stored for extended periods of time.



Photograph 5

Health Hazards

Health risks from excessive accumulation are another factor that should not be underestimated. Wet or dry stacked materials may harbor bacterial, fungal and even viral organisms that can cause serious illnesses. During the removal of wet garbage as part of a restoration, fungal spore concentrations have been measured in the hundreds of thousands of counts per cubic meter. They included an incredible array of species, including *Stachybotrys*, *Chaetomium* and other tertiary colonizers that typically are not recovered from air samples. **Photograph 5** shows some formerly valuable contents that became simply source material for mold growth.

Many gram-negative bacteria types, typically those associated with sewage spills, are common in wet debris because of residual human and animal waste. Even viral contamination such as hantavirus can be present. These types of threats justify the use of full-face respiratory protection and protective body covering. **Photograph 6** shows debris in a hoarder's (*continued on page 37*)



Photograph 6

Photos courtesy of Wonder Makers, Inc.