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Contact: Joy Howell (202) 302-5932
TV/Radio: Barbara Holzer (202) 588-7716

KILLER STOVES: Most Kitchen Ranges Pose Serious Threat to Millions of Americans, Consumer Groups Warn

Retailers Not Installing Simple Safety Devices to Prevent Ranges From Tipping Over and Causing Severe Injuries and Deaths

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Approximately 15 to 20 million kitchens in the United States are equipped with a range that can tip over and crush, scald or burn whoever is standing in front of it, consumer groups warned today in a press conference at the National Press Club. Public Citizen, U.S. PIRG and the Consumer Federation of America detailed the longstanding problem in most brands of electric and gas ranges that affect households throughout the country.

According to documents from the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the national retailer Sears, manufacturers and the government have known about this lurking danger for more than twenty years. Since the early 1980s, manufacturers of ranges began using lighter-gauge steel to reduce costs, even though they quickly learned that this resulted in a tendency for the lighter-weight appliances to tip over when weight was applied to the oven door.

After receiving numerous reports of severe accidents caused by tipping stoves, industry-standard organizations Underwriters Laboratories (UL) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) both developed national, voluntary safety standards that require electric and gas ranges manufactured after 1991 to remain stable when 250 pounds of pressure is applied on the oven door for five minutes. The standards also require sellers to install the anti-tip brackets that manufacturers agreed to supply, but the retailers rarely install the brackets. While the retailers are all aware of the safety hazard, the delivery people they contract with often are not equipped or trained to perform the installation service, and the sales people rarely mention the issue to the buyer. As a result, most homeowners who purchase the ranges do not know that the units are not secure and are unaware that the brackets are necessary for stability.

“There have been more than 100 reported cases of death and injury from scalding and burns due to hot foods and liquids spilling from the stove top, and from the weight crushing anyone in the path of the tipping ranges,” said Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook. “Considering the lack of consistent reporting and the millions of homes with these ovens, we believe the numbers of those maimed or killed by ranges tipping over are much greater.”

This design flaw has particularly affected children and the elderly. CPSC accident reports include cases of a 24-pound toddler who stood on an open oven door, tipping the range so that boiling chicken soup spilled over him, causing severe burns; a 3-year old who climbed onto the range door and was killed when the stove fell over on him; and an 88-year old woman who slipped as she was cleaning her range and grabbed the oven

door for support – which caused the oven to flip over and crush her in her own kitchen with her upper body wedged into the hot oven in which she had just finished baking cookies.

Sears, one of the largest retailers of gas and electric ranges, admitted in an internal memo in 1996 that the brackets were installed for only an estimated 5 percent of ranges sold – and possibly as low as 2-3 percent. In a 1999 letter to Sears, Underwriters Laboratories informed the retailer that it expected the ranges with the UL Listing Mark to be installed with the anti-tip safety brackets supplied by the manufacturers. Sears gave a misleading response to UL in 2000 that implied the company was in full compliance with the UL standard.

“When companies fail to take simple steps to save lives, and the CPSC fails to act on a well-known and preventable problem that leads to horrible burns and deaths, something’s very wrong,” said U.S. PIRG Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzwinski. “It’s time to fix the stove tip-over problem that’s been ignored for too long.”

The CPSC was aware of the oven-tipping problem since at least 1984, and received reports detailing numerous deaths and serious injuries, mostly involving children – some as young as 12 months old – and the elderly. It never took any steps to require notification to owners, the installation of the brackets or the redesign of the ranges in the future.

Consumer representatives objected to the CPSC consistently failing in its mission to protect American consumers.

“Retailers should notify consumers of this safety hazard immediately and take steps to comply with the voluntary standards, including retrofitting all freestanding stoves with the necessary safety bracket and installing new stoves properly,” said Rachel Weintraub, director of product safety and senior counsel for Consumer Federation of America.

President Bush’s recent nomination of Michael Baroody as chairman of the consumer regulatory agency assures it won’t protect consumers in the future. Baroody is currently the executive vice president for the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and has spent most of his professional life as a lobbyist and political operative on behalf of corporate interests.

In March, Reps. John Dingell (D-Mich.) and Bart Stupak (D-Mich.) requested and received documentation from the CPSC, and now the House Energy and Commerce committee may hold investigative hearings. Today, to avoid any more preventable injuries, the consumer groups called on the sellers of ranges to notify all owners of the danger of tipping stoves and the need for safety brackets, and to install the brackets for any existing owners of the stoves.

“American consumers are being killed and terribly injured by companies who are cynically refusing to make their ranges safe and by the agency established to protect them,” said Claybrook. “Action to fix this preventable hazard will come far too late for the many people who have been maimed and killed, but we hope it comes in time to save countless others.”

To learn more about this safety issue, visit www.killerstoves.com.

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Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. U.S. PIRG is the Boston-based federation of state Public Interest Research Groups. Consumer Federation of America is a consumer advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. and made up of some 300 nonprofit organizations.