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### Environment

# What goes up tumbles down as garbage

BY CATHY HAMILTON-WISSMER

Directorate of Public Works

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Balloons floating across the sky carrying good wishes are a beautiful thought and sight. What is not so beautiful is the debris they leave behind when they land.

“People don’t realize the impact of balloons on the environment, once they are released,” said Paul Steucke, Directorate of Public Works Environmental Division branch chief. “It’s simply littering.”

Balloons have a destructive effect on animals, environment and people. They can last years in the environment, risking harm to any animal who comes across them. Latex balloons are not biodegradable, even when marketed as such.

Animals can mistake burst balloons as an enticing meal, causing intestinal blockage and death. The ribbons or string tied to balloons and can entangle any animal that comes in contact with it.

Many life-changing events are marked with a mass balloon release such as graduation, retirement and memorials, but this is a damaging practice. Balloons are made with chemicals, plasticizers and artificial dyes — not 100 percent latex — and can last years as hazardous trash.

Mylar/foil balloons can cause power outages and spark fires. They take several years before breaking down.

Balloons are a waste of helium, a finite resource, used in medical devices, space exploration, cryogenics and ventilators, among many other uses. The price of helium does not reflect supply. If it did, the helium balloon you buy for \$3.50 should cost about \$35.

There is no chemical way to manufacture helium for replacement.

Mass balloon releases and sky lanterns are illegal in various nations. In the U.S., several states have banned the intentional release of a balloon inflated with a gas that is lighter than air — excluding balloons released for scientific or meteorological purposes, a hot air balloon or a balloon released and remaining indoors.

There is a better way to mark that special occasion. Consider the dramatic effect of flags, ribbon dancers, pinwheels, bubbles and candles. Other fun ideas can be more engaging. Put together a drum circle, a flock of pink flamingos on a lawn, floating flowers or flower petals on clear water, origami, a wildflower seed bomb, painted rocks or planting bulbs.

Memorable moments that also make a big impact and carry the message.

For more information on the environmental division on JBLM, visit @SustainableJBLM on Facebook.



Directorate of Public Works  
 Bruce McDonald, a Joint Base Lewis-McChord forester, finds a spent Mylar balloon on a tree plantation on base April 9.

More information  
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