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Sales of Y2K survival gear booming

(Last updated 1:37 PM ET March 7)

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CHICAGO, March 7 (UPI) Sales of generators and freeze-dried food are booming, reflecting concerns that the year 2000, or Y2K, computer bug could disrupt power, communications and transportation systems.

Crain's Chicago Business says preparations no longer are confined to fringe groups. Otherwise unflappable working people, professionals and executives are preparing for the possibility of power outages, food shortages and financial collapse.

Raymond Groban of Groban Supply Co., a Chicago industrial equipment company, says orders for portable generators are rolling into his company faster than he can fill them.

Worry is being heightened by news stories generated by studies on system readiness. A U.S. Senate report last week said most U.S. utilities, big companies and federal agencies will have solved their computer problems by yearend, but warned that disruptions abroad are likely.

A number of businesses are starting to realize the sales potential of Y2K fears. Tru-Serv Corp., a Chicago-based cooperative serving 10,000 stores including True Value hardware stores, will include a Y2K display featuring wood stoves, lanterns, fuel, batteries and flashlights at a buying market for members in Atlanta in April.

Ace Hardware Corp. says it will include a list of 50 to 100 Y2K- readiness items in a March newsletter to its more than 5,000 member stores.

Ace Merchandise Manager Jimmy Alexander told Crain's, "We've already sold three years' worth of oil lamps in the month of January alone."

However, Tru-Serv and Ace are advising member stores not to feed the panic. "If nothing happens," Alexander said, "then customers are going to bring it back."

My Own Meals, which makes shelf-stable meals, says it plans to double its average inventory by May. One customer ordered \$2,000 worth of military rations and plans to head with her family to a summer home. Another man purchased \$540 worth of freeze dried eggs from a suburban camping store.

Psychologist Ralph Erber says when people are uncertain about what to do they look to others for confirmation. Buying survival supplies becomes a rational decision."

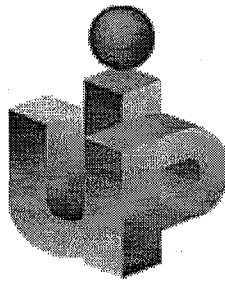
"You spend a relatively little amount of money, and if (a worst-case scenario) doesn't come true, you haven't lost a whole lot," he said.

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