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Michael Schennum/The Republic

Stu Bloom of Rave Fabricare Master Cleaners in Scottsdale thinks "organic cleaning" is a hoax.

Can drycleaning be 'organic'?

Technique not what people think, critics say.

By Jennifer Price

After a Republic article ran last month featuring a young entrepreneur and his "organic" cleaning technique, a feud erupted in the drycleaning industry.

Brad Keeling, owner of Organic Cleaners in north Phoenix and downtown, uses a solvent called DF2000, a synthetic petroleum. He advertises that his solvent is chemically inert, biodegradable and non-toxic. And the name of his business, Organic Cleaners, implies a "green" establishment.

Tim Maxwell, president of Green Earth, said only three dry-cleaning processes are truly environmentally friendly: wet cleaning, carbon-dioxide systems and siloxane fluids.

This is where things get a little complicated, because the public has a certain perception of what the word organic means. When you go to the grocery store and buy organic foods, you're buying foods that are pesticide-free and absent of any growth stimulants. But when you buy any other product that is labeled "organic," all you're getting is a product that contains a hydrocarbon, because by definition a chemical is organic if it contains the element carbon.

DF2000 is indeed organic, but so is gasoline and most all other dry-cleaning solvents used since the industry was created, including perchloroethylene, or perc, the solvent used by more than 85 percent of U.S. dry cleaners.

So the word "organic" doesn't translate to environmentally friendly, chemical-free and "green" when it comes to dry cleaning.

Alan Spielvogel, chief of the Center for Garment Analysis, said some of the most hazardous materials are, in fact, organic.

"By saying something is organic does not mean it's environmentally friendly or healthy," Spielvogel said. "Anything that contains the element carbon is organic. The term organic as far as a dry-cleaning solvent does not mean that the solvent is less toxic than another type."

Spielvogel said that although it's true Keeling is using an organic solvent, he said Keeling is using the term organic as a marketing strategy.

"The dry cleaner makes an investment of \$60,000-plus on a dry cleaner machine, and if he's in a competitive market, he'll use anything he can think of to get an edge on the competition," Spielvogel said. "This may be a crude form of marketing, but it's still marketing. How many other industries have used scare tactics

to get business? I mean, politicians do it all the time to trick people, get people to believe something.”

Keeling said since DF2000 is an organic-based solvent, he’s not lying by using the name Organic Cleaners.

“It’s (DF2000) way better than perc dry cleaners,” Keeling said. “When you come to my store, if you thought you were getting something better than your traditional dry cleaners, you are. It’s a step in the right direction.”

Spielvogel said the National Cleaners Association doesn’t agree with this kind of marketing but added it’s not illegal.

Stu Bloom, owner of Rave Fabricare Master Cleaners in Scottsdale, thinks “organic cleaning” is a hoax.

“Merely saying that you are green, eco-friendly and/or organic and posting signs on your dry cleaning machine storefront and delivery vans does not make it true. It’s piggybanking on the public’s perception of the word organic.

“The dry-cleaning industry unfortunately has no standard as to what organic means. So every single cleaner thinks they can hang up signs that say organic dry cleaning.”

In January, California became the first state to phase out perc, banning the purchase of new perc machines as of 2008 and banning any use of perc by 2023. Arizona has no such ban.

Perc is a clear, colorless liquid that has a sharp, sweet odor and evaporates quickly. It has been linked in studies to bladder, esophageal and other cancers.

Dave Silliman, director of the Western States Drycleaners and Launderers Association and owner of Uptowne Dry Cleaning in Phoenix, said most perc users today are responsible operators and don’t pollute anything into the groundwater. He said the stigma surrounding perc is linked to the historical contamination 40 years ago when dry cleaners would throw out their leftover solvents.

Tim Maxwell, president of Green Earth, said only three dry-cleaning processes are truly environmentally friendly: wet cleaning, carbon-dioxide systems and siloxane fluids.

Wet cleaning processes garments completely in water but is difficult because certain delicate garments can be ruined with water, Maxwell said.

Carbon dioxide systems use a liquid form of carbon to clean garments, but these systems are very expensive and only a handful are in the U.S.

Siloxane fluids, such as Green Earth, are made of silicone and oxygen. Since Green Earth doesn’t contain carbon, it’s by definition inorganic but yet still environmentally friendly, Maxwell said.

He said that as Green Earth degrades into the environment, it breaks down into sand, water and carbon dioxide, leaving no toxic chemicals behind.

Rave Fabricare has been cleaning in siloxane since 2001, said Bloom. “We love siloxane because it’s odorless, gentle on fine garments, produces bright whites, keeps colors vibrant and leaves garments with a soft feel. From an environmental standpoint, it’s the only drycleaning fluid in the Valley that’s completely biodegradable and environmentally benign. There’s no harmful chemicals to dirty the air, contaminate the soil or pollute the water.”