

Monday, September 8, 2003



Photo by Jack Kurtz / The Arizona Republic

Stuart Bloom of Rave Fabricare Mastercleaners says their silicone-based cleaning solution extends the life of pricey outfits.

# Concern over chemicals dampening dry cleaners

Staff and wire reports; Staff reporter Christine L. Romero contributed to this article.

The ins and outs of dry cleaning are hardly a concern for most consumers. The mysterious process that takes a dirty piece of clothing and turns it into a clean, crisp garment is more often taken for granted.

"What do I think of dry cleaning? Who does the best job," Menachem Spira said while dropping off shirts at Pride Cleaners in Los Angeles. "Who doesn't burn my shirts, who takes out the stains. That's what I think about dry cleaning."

But for dry cleaners, the issue of how clothes should be cleaned is at the heart of a debate prompted by increasing ques-

tions about perchloroethylene, or perc, the industry's most popular cleaning solvent, that sparks environmental and cancer concerns. The switch to "green" technologies, often more expensive than perc, sparks debate among those in the highly competitive industry, which is now facing double-digit sales drop since the onslaught of the recession.

The Environmental Protection Agency classifies perc, used by more than 90 percent of dry cleaners, as an air and water pollutant and suspected carcinogen. It will be phased out in the Los Angeles area by 2020. There has long

been talk about similar bans that would affect Arizona operators, but things remain status quo, said Greg Tick, owner of Phoenix's Windsor Cleaners and president of the Western States Drycleaners & Launderers Association.

"It's a good cleaner because it's more aggressive on stains," Tick said. Customers expect items to come back clean, and perc does the job. "We are here to serve the customer."

His shop uses about 160 gallons of perc annually. By contrast, shops of similar size would use about 100 gallons monthly, Tick said. Advances in machine

technology are cutting the loss of perc, he said. Those losses are what leak into the ground and air, and are the reason perc has become an environmental problem. The clothes may be clean and the machines are more efficient, but depressed sales mean tight times.

"It's been a depressed industry because of the economy for the last two years," Tick said. Sales in the mostly mom-and-pop shop industry are down more than 20 percent, he said. The trend toward more casual clothing and widespread unemployment are the chief reasons.

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## A better way to get out stains, or a health concern?

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Given the industry depression, many of the nation's 30,000 dry cleaners are hesitant to give up their old ways, unwilling to switch to more expensive, less toxic cleaning systems until forced to do so. Others are embracing the shift to greener technologies, recognizing that change is inevitable.

For Scottsdale's Stuart Bloom the choice to use "greener" ways stems from recognizing his customers' needs. His shop Rave Fabricare Mastercleaners, near Hayden and Scottsdale roads, uses a silicone-based dry cleaning process because it is gentle on clothing in addition to being environmentally sound.

"We do fine, investment garments for folks who are looking for hand-cleaned, hand-finished clothing," he said. "It's a very gentle dry-cleaning solution. That's key for us."

Many in the industry, including Bloom, say perc is not a hazard when used properly.

"My customers aren't focused on the environmental aspect, very few customers are," he said. "They are focused on how good of a cleaning job you do."

Bloom said the choice to use the silicone-based solution helps extend the life of pricey outfits.

"There is a cloud over perc," Bloom said. "But quite honestly, if there is superb management of your machine there should be no issue. It's an issue because there are a lot of operators who don't spend the money and the time to maintain their machines.

The trade associations representing neighborhood dry cleaners and perc manufacturers are sponsoring their own research into perc's health and environmental risks, representatives said.

"If we felt the chances were more than likely that perc was a carcinogen, we'd be the first to say, hey, it's got to go," said William Fisher, chief executive of the International Fabricare Institute, based in Silver Spring, Md.

Still, the institute has recommended its members switch to non-perc solvents and new non-perc-based equipment because of what it believes will be continued governmental attention on the chemical.

"Dry cleaners are aware, irrespective of the truth, that perc is going to be a media sensation," Fisher said.

The EPA has no immediate plans to ban perc in dry cleaning, said John Katz, Pollution Prevention Coordinator at the EPA's Pacific Southwest division in San Francisco. For now, the EPA will continue to set regulations for perc's usage and remain "technology neutral" and not recommend dry cleaning systems and solvents to the industry, Katz said.

Dry cleaners face a confusing array of alternatives -- hydrocarbon and silicon-based solvents, wet cleaning and liquid carbon dioxide.

Industry professionals say each method has its drawbacks -- wet cleaning tends to shrink garments and requires more stretching and pressing, and carbon-dioxide systems are too expensive for most independent dry cleaners.

Michael Jordan, co-owner of Bell Drapery & Cleaners, a family owned business, says he has seen the machines that use perc change drastically.

"Now, it's all enclosed in one machine," Jordan said. The item goes into the machine dry and emerges dry. Older technology was similar to household washer and dryers: The item comes out of one machine wet and is dried in another.