

Chemical-Free Dry Cleaning: A Sound Proposition

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Anyone who has sent clothes to a dry cleaner has experienced it. You can detect a chemical smell when you take the clothes from the plastic wrapping. Many of us wonder: Does that chemical smell indicate we're being exposed to something harmful?

The chemical we smell, perchloroethylene or perc, is in fact hazardous to the environment, a health risk to the cleaners and employees who work at dry-cleaning facilities, and a problem for communities where dry cleaners are located.

In trying to deal with that hazard, Chicago Ald. Edward Burke (14th) considered introducing a motion in October calling for a six-month phaseout of perc. In Los Angeles, the Air Pollution Control District voted for a far lengthier phaseout of perc. The air district also provided an incentive fund for cleaners to make the switch.

What makes the proposed Chicago action and the L.A. phaseout so contentious is that perc has long been the favorite cleaning solvent for the vast majority of dry cleaners. Dry-cleaning businesses are typically small neighborhood businesses. So while emissions from a single dry-cleaning plant might be small, the cumulative impacts of exposure from the approximately 1,400 cleaners in the Chicago area have created a major environmental and health hazard.

As early as the 1970s, research began to indicate that perc was carcinogenic. Given those risks, government agencies sought to minimize perc exposures. Expensive devices were required that reduced some of the exposure but failed to eliminate the problem. Not many were happy with the outcome. Environmentalists and community members were unhappy because serious hazards still remained. Dry cleaners were unhappy because of the complex rules and regulations, horrendous liability problems. And groups like Consumers Union began to be concerned about the exposure to customers from the perc that remained on garments.

As regulation of perc dry cleaning intensified, so did interest in alternatives to perc. One such alternative was professional wet cleaning--a non-toxic water-based cleaning process that uses computer-controlled washers and dryers, specially formulated detergents and specialized finishing equipment. By removing perc from the cleaning process, professional wet cleaning eliminates all the risks and regulations associated with perc use. Chicago has been in the forefront of the search for perc alternatives, including wet cleaning. In the 1990s, the Chicago-based Center for Neighborhood Technology conducted a multiyear research program to help

cleaners move away from perc and facilitated the development of one of the very first commercial wet cleaners to operate in the United States, the Greener Cleaner.

A number of research studies have indicated that wet cleaning is a viable alternative. It cleans clothes as well as a perc-based system, it's as profitable (in fact some key costs, including the upfront costs of the machines, are cheaper), and it has major environmental and health benefits. And operators of dry cleaners who have made the switch from perc to professional wet cleaning have done so in part to avoid dealing with all the hazardous waste disposal charges, liability concerns and other regulations for cleaners.

As evidence of the viability of professional wet cleaning--and the availability of several other alternatives--has become apparent, some policymakers have begun to explore the idea that instead of imposing burdensome regulations, a better solution is available. The Chicago and Los Angeles lessons are instructive in that regard.

In Chicago, negotiations are continuing between Ald. Burke and the dry cleaners about what to do. The perc-based dry cleaners don't want a phaseout. Instead, they would prefer a policy that continues to emphasize controls over the use of perc rather than its elimination. One of the problems with that approach is the difficulty in implementing it. Pollution control-related rules are notoriously difficult to monitor. When cleaners do get monitored, non-compliance rates have been extremely high, between 70 and 95 percent, according to several studies.

A lengthy phaseout can work much better. Since dry-cleaning equipment lasts about 10 years, a 10 or 15-year phaseout would allow a cleaner to purchase the new equipment by the time the old equipment reached the end of its useful life. Once phased out, workers would no longer be breathing perc fumes and community and customer exposure to perc would disappear.

A phaseout is the best kind of change from a business, worker, community and environmental perspective. It's chemical-free cleaning and it's a sound proposition for everyone.

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