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Dry cleaning is getting greener, but some efforts are spotty

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Though still largely dependent on a hazardous chemical, the dry-cleaning industry has worked hard to clean up its act.

Of the more than 300 dry cleaners in King County, at least a third promote themselves as green in some way. But just as dry cleaning isn't totally dry (it uses liquid solvents), "eco-friendly dry cleaning" is not always what it seems.

To find a greener cleaner, here's what you need to know:

Reach for the stars

Perchloroethylene, or perc, has been the solvent of choice for dry cleaners since the 1940s. It cleans clothes effectively and is not flammable. However, perc can cause environmental and health problems, and may pose a particular risk for dry-cleaning employees and those who live or work in the same building as a dry cleaner.

Over the past 20 years, government agencies have put increasing pressure on the dry-cleaning industry to



Green dry-cleaning resources

King County EnviroStars: www.envirostars.com

Co-op America: Green dry cleaning: www.coopamerica.org/pubs/realmoney/articles/drycleaning.cfm

Consumer Reports — Dry-cleaning alternatives: www.greenerchoices.org/products.cfm?product=drycleaning&

cut back on perc. Responding to these concerns, many local dry cleaners have reduced their use of the chemical, improved their handling of perc or switched to another solvent, says Trevor Fernandes of the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County.

Fernandes performs some of the inspections for King County EnviroStars, a program that certifies dry cleaners and other businesses for reducing, recycling and properly managing hazardous wastes. Pierce, Kitsap, Whatcom and Jefferson counties also have EnviroStars programs.

Consumers looking for a dry cleaner should start with the EnviroStars Web site, which lists cleaners by city. The highest ranking of five stars indicates that a cleaner has taken significant steps to deal with hazardous wastes.

But most EnviroStars dry cleaners still use perc. Few cleaners overall have switched to an alternative method because it may set them back more than \$70,000, Fernandes says.

Beyond perc locally

"Wet cleaning" and liquid carbon dioxide (CO₂) are the preferred alternatives to perc suggested by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency. Unlike dry cleaning, wet cleaning uses water as a solvent, as well as special soaps.

CO₂ cleaning employs pressurized carbon dioxide, along with other cleaning agents. Although CO₂ is a major greenhouse gas, this technology uses reclaimed CO₂ and thus does not contribute to global warming, according to Peter Sinsheimer, a dry-cleaning expert and researcher with Occidental College in California.

Unfortunately, CO₂ and wet cleaners are rare in the Seattle area. Apparently the only local cleaner currently using CO₂ equipment is Corry's CO₂ Dry Cleaner on Mercer Island (not the various Corry's cleaners in Seattle).

Cleaners that use wet cleaning for some of their orders include Madison Carnolia Cleaners in Magnolia, the Cleaning Center of Redmond and the Mercer Island Corry's.

Green? Really?

Two other options more commonly used locally are also touted as green and may boast advantages over

perc, but have their own issues.

Hydrocarbon solvents such as DF-2000 get negative marks from some environmental groups because they are petroleum-based.

And a method called GreenEarth contains a silicone-based solvent called siloxane or D5. Consumer Reports says some studies have shown siloxane can cause cancer in lab animals. In May, the Canadian government said it is considering banning D5 because of its toxicity in the environment.

No set standards

Some cleaners promote their "organic" process or soaps, but no standards exist on what that means. And consumers should be aware that most online national listings of alternative dry cleaners contain outdated or erroneous data for our area. Always check with a cleaner to confirm which cleaning process it currently uses.

Get rid of your hang-ups

Many dry cleaners enthusiastically take back wire hangers for reuse, in part because the price of hangers has risen substantially this year. Some cleaners may even provide "hanger caddy" cardboard boxes to their customers to make it easy to return hangers.

A number of local dry cleaners also use the new EcoHangers, made in the U.S. from recycled paper. A company called Hanger Network provides these to dry cleaners at no charge. The catch is that the company sells advertising on them, which means the customer may end up with an ad for beer or deodorant hanging in the closet.

Durable, reusable dry-cleaning bags have always seemed like a great idea, but have never really caught on. However, a few cleaners accept the ubiquitous plastic dry-cleaning bags from customers for reuse or recycling. Dry-cleaning bags are not included in the new Seattle fee on some plastic and paper bags scheduled to take effect Jan. 1, 2009.

Give your clothes a hand

To save money and reduce your environmental impact, look for clothes that don't require dry cleaning.

You also might consider washing certain items at home labeled "dry-clean only," but keep in mind the

manufacturer is not liable for any damage. In Consumer Reports tests, they successfully washed by hand light-colored, plain-weave rayon and silk blouses with a "dry-clean only" label. Some folks hand-wash clothes and then take them to a dry cleaner just for pressing.

Despite the confusion about green dry cleaning, great strides have been made. As customers become more knowledgeable, we should see more "dry greening" than ever.

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