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## Dry cleaners face deadline to clean up their act

**By: [Mike Aldax](#)****Examiner Staff Writer****December 4, 2009**

SAN FRANCISCO — Nearly half the 120 dry cleaners in San Francisco may have to increase prices or face closure as the deadline looms for them to comply with new environmental policies.

Shops in question own equipment that uses the solvent perchloroethylene, or perc, in the cleaning process. The popular solvent is widely used around the country, but it's been found in recent decades to be extremely toxic and exists in "elevated levels" in apartments above dry cleaning shops, according to the San Francisco Department of the Environment.

To phase out use of the solvent, California passed a law two years ago requiring all dry cleaning shops that share a wall or ceiling with a residence to discontinue use of perc machines by July 1.

Forty stores in The City still operate such machines, said Sushma Dhulipala of the Environment Department. If store owners want to stay in business or avoid outsourcing their cleaning, they will have to purchase an alternative machine that can cost between \$40,000 and \$150,000, depending on the technology, Dhulipala said.

Another 13 shops are facing a similar fate, depending on an upcoming ruling by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District that could shorten state rules on a machine's lifespan, which is now 15 years.

The requirements are placing a massive burden on the predominantly family-owned businesses, said Francis Choy, board member of the Chinese Dry Cleaning and Laundry Association.

"It's a nightmare," said Choy, who owns Mack's Valet Cleaners and just bought a \$60,000 machine three years ago. "A lot of people don't know what to do."

Choy's association is meeting with owners today to educate them on compliance, since many businesses are still unsure of exactly how the regulations affect them.



Rough transition: Francis Choy, owner of Mack's Valet Cleaners and a board member of the Chinese Dry Cleaning and Laundry Association, says the solvent ban is a "nightmare." (Cindy Chew/The Examiner)

City and state officials are recommending that owners switch to wet cleaning technology, which is better for the environment than other alternatives and costs between \$40,000 and \$70,000. However, professional wet cleaning — a much different process than using a typical washing machine — is more labor-intensive, a cost that will likely end up being passed down to the consumer, said Marc Nash, an air quality specialist with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and an industry expert.

“Will you spend \$15 or \$20 dollars to clean a jacket or sweater?” Choy said.

Karl Huie, who owns shops in San Francisco and Sausalito, said at a recent Commission on the Environment hearing that business increased 15 percent at the onset of the recession after he switched to wet cleaning two years ago.

The state offers \$10,000 grants to owners who switch to professional wet cleaning. The City is offering an additional \$5,000 for four eligible cleaners who make that switch, but it does not have the money to offer more, Dhulipala said.

## Unkempt spaces in shops are fertile ground for fires

Recent fire inspections of dozens of dry cleaners have unearthed an alarming buildup of lint, plastics and other highly flammable material at shops in San Francisco.

The dry cleaners that are being forced by state law to swap out their machines next year with technologies that use less-hazardous materials have had to apply for permits with the Fire Department.

That’s because the chemical used in the machines being outlawed, while hazardous to health and the environment, is not flammable, the California Air Resources Board said. Alternative technologies, except for water-based and carbon-dioxide methods, use solvents that are flammable, the agency said.

Fire inspectors have had little trouble making sure certain shops are fire-safe in regard to the new machines, but inspectors have stumbled upon some that haven’t been great housekeepers, said Lt. Mindy Talmadge.

They’ve allowed buildup of lint, plastic and other materials that are too close to boilers, she said.

“That stuff’s going to burn way faster [than the chemicals used in dry cleaning machines],” Talmadge said.

Now that they require permits, which cost \$344 annually and \$330 for the initial application, the shops will face regular inspections, she said.

## Complying with new California law

State law requires at least one-third, and possibly more, of The City’s dry cleaning shops to purchase a new cleaning machine before July 1 that doesn’t use perchloroethylene. Family-owned shops say they cannot afford the sums and may be forced to shut down their businesses. Here are some of the machine options:

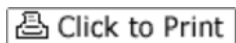
Machine type	Installation cost	Typical machine/system cost
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Professional wet cleaning	\$3,500	\$38,300
CO <sup>2</sup> (60-lb. capacity)	\$48,000	\$143,000
Multisolvent hydrocarbon (50 lb. capacity)	\$4,300	\$47K-\$50K
DrySolv (n-PB)	Included	\$80,000
Solvair (30-lb. capacity)	\$3K-\$8K	\$80,000

*Source: California Air Resources Board*

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