

Is your dry cleaner still using toxic PERC?

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ERICH: Washington state has reached a major milestone in reducing the use of toxic substances thanks to the successful efforts of the state Department of Ecology's Product Replacement Program. 50 dry cleaning businesses across the state have now switched from using toxic perchloroethylene, or PERC, to a less toxic alternative since 2019. However, there are still about 60 businesses operating with PERC machinery, which has prompted Ecology to redouble its efforts to eliminate the hazardous chemical from use.

I'm Erich Ebel, communications manager with Ecology's Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction program, and joining me now is the supervisor for Haz-Waste's Toxic Reduction unit, Myles Perkins. Myles, can you tell us what the Product Replacement Program is and how it got started?

MYLES: Back in I think it was 2018 or 2019, we were getting ready for the 2019 legislative session, and myself and a small group of folks came up with the initial idea for the Product Replacement Program. And really, the goal for that specifically was to find ways where we could incentivize the replacement of toxic chemicals in use at a lot of businesses that we work with statewide. Really, the idea was that if we could financially incentivize people to get rid of toxic chemicals, it would lead to less waste and less hazardous material generation in the future. So it started out that way, and we ended up successfully being able to get some funding, and we had about four or five priority projects – the first of which was PERC dry cleaners.

ERICH: And PERC, that again stands for perchloroethylene?

MYLES: That exactly right, it's a halogenated organic carbon, which contaminates the environment and also can be a human health concern when it comes to breathing in the vapors, especially when they're in use at these dry cleaning businesses.

ERICH: They use this chemical to "clean garments" brought in by customers...how long have they been doing this? Decades, I would assume.

MYLES: Yes. Actually, it's a great chemical for cleaning. It's called dry cleaning because typically, it's just the solvent that can take and remove grime and gunk in your clothing, and ultimately what it does is it can remove it without getting your clothes really wet and creating shrinkage damage to your clothing. It works really well for that, but it definitely has some adverse issues throughout the state. We've had almost 50 transition, and the exciting part is the vast majority of those have moved to a technology called professional wet cleaning, which in our opinion is the safest, most environmentally friendly alternative out there. So we've given out that many vouchers. Before we started the program, I think there was maybe two actual professional wet cleaning shops in the state. Now there's over 30, which is exciting, you know? We estimate that dry cleaners use about 120 gallons per year of solvent depending on how many clothes they clean and things like that, so if you use that to extrapolate, about 6,000 gallons of PERC is no longer in use at these businesses. Which, again, is great considering that PERC can be very pervasive in the environment and a small amount can contaminate a lot. So we're really excited about those numbers.

ERICH: But your work isn't finished yet. You have more dry cleaners in the state that still haven't switched, is that right?

MYLES: Yes, that's true. When we started the program, we knew there were about 100 dry cleaners out there that are still working with PERC. This program has already worked with about half to transition, which is really exciting, but there's still a lot of work left. So we're going to be continuing and revamping our effort to go out to these businesses and work with them to change, and as part of that effort we're actually going to be offering a higher incentive for a number of reasons. We think it will be well worth the effort in terms of environmental contamination and also supporting these businesses.

ERICH: Myles, if there are any dry cleaners listening to this interview who want to take advantage of this program, what are the next steps for them?

MYLES: Great question. So if you're looking for more information on the program, we have a website. You can probably go into Google, type in "Ecology PERC Replacement Program" and you should be able to get a link directly to our web page that clearly defines what we need to do to qualify for this and what steps you need to take to work with us to actually achieve and install new equipment. We actually partner with local authorities to conduct this work, so we will be working with you step by step.

ERICH: So what's the end game here, Myles? Are we realistically going to be able to rid the state of toxic PERC-using dry cleaning machinery?

MYLES: Our goal is to eliminate PERC. It's not outlawed in the state, although at the professional level PERC is being very closely looked at. It may be restricted further, potentially banned, so you know, getting ready for that, we'd love to position businesses to have another option to go to. So our goal is to try to transition everyone if possible and hopefully eliminate any source of PERC from dry cleaning businesses in the future.

ERICH: Very good, thank you very much. Myles Perkins, unit supervisor for the Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction program's Toxic Reduction unit. If anyone needs more information on how to rid the state of PERC machinery at dry cleaning businesses, please feel free to visit the Department of Ecology's website at ecy.wa.gov.