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Cutting dry cleaning's hazards Ithaca shop offers an alternative dry cleaning solvent

By JENNIE DALEY
Journal Staff

ITHACA — It didn't take long for Jim Kellogg to realize he wasn't keen on using toxic chemicals to run his dry cleaning business.

When using perc, or perchloroethylene, a common dry cleaning solvent, Kellogg could only have certified employees operate his machines, had to fill out reams of paperwork for state officials and there was a persistent chemical smell. Not to mention that perc can cause damage to the nervous system, affect reproductive organs and is considered a likely human carcinogen.



MATTHEW HINTON / Journal Staff

Jim Kellogg, owner of Angelo Dry Cleaner, fixes buttons on dress shirts Tuesday. Angelo Dry Cleaner has been using a less hazardous solvent in its dry cleaning machines since 1999.

Perchloroethylene

Perchloroethylene, commonly known as perc, is used by about 80 percent of U.S. dry cleaners to remove stains and clean clothes.

When first introduced to dry cleaners in the 1930s, little was known about its health effects, and it was considered something of a miracle chemical because it could be aggressive on stains, but was not flammable like its petroleum-based predecessors.

Since then, concerns have arisen about perc's effects on the central nervous system, kidney, liver and possibly the reproductive system.

residual perc contamination.

All of this sent Kellogg, owner of Angelo Dry Cleaner on the corner of North Meadow and Court Streets, in search of an alternative. In 1999, he found his answer in a petroleum-based compound, Exxon DF2000.

"It's highly refined petroleum solvent," Kellogg said. "Now anybody can use my machine."

Kellogg claimed his clothes are cleaned well with the less-harsh solvent and are left with a better "hand," the industry term for the feel of a fabric after cleaning.

The switch hasn't hurt business either. With a sign out front reading "Ithaca's only non-toxic dry cleaner," Kellogg is sure some customers have been drawn in by the

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Spills of the chemical have led to health concerns and costly clean-ups locally and nationwide. Most recently, a former dry cleaner just two blocks down from Kellogg was recommended as a state Superfund site because of

alternative.

Christi Boothe recently dropped clothes off at Angelo for the first time. After always meaning to drop her dry cleaning off when grocery shopping at Wegmans, she found she never remembered to do it.

"I thought, if I make it a special trip, I might actually get my stuff to the dry cleaners. I was looking for something not as toxic and looking for some place new," she said. "Angelo's doesn't smell, so it's nice. You don't feel bad for the workers."

A check of other Ithaca dry cleaners showed that Angelo's charges for garments cleaned with the DF 2000 solvent are comparable with those charged by other area dry cleaners using the more traditional chemicals.

Angelo employees don't handle perc on a daily basis but recent testing done next door, at the HSC Associates office, show Kellogg may not have escaped the toxic history of his industry. The corner lot where Angelo Dry Cleaner sits has been a dry cleaner since 1929, according to Kellogg. Recent tests at HSC show undisclosed levels of perc and trichloroethene contamination. Trichloroethene, better known as TCE, is a byproduct of perc.

Kellogg said his property hasn't been tested yet but he suspects it will be soon.

"Back then, they'd change filters and just go throw it out in the garbage and I'm sure it leaked out of there. That's why I knew I needed to switch," he said.

Petroleum-based solvents clearly have feel-good features when compared to perc, but they are not without drawbacks. For one, the product is flammable, though Kellogg said it's not a serious concern. Also, for those who want an environmentally neutral dry cleaning product, petroleum likely won't meet that standard.

Jan Shay, an Ithaca resident, only uses a dry cleaner "once in a blue moon" because she doesn't see it as an earth-friendly process. But, when needing to get something dry cleaned for a friend, she said she appreciated the Angelo option.

"I was going to call my daughter and let her know because she does use a dry cleaner," Shay said. "I was pleased there was an alternative but I think just moving away from it is what we need to do."

In Los Angeles, administrators took that view to heart. There, all perc use must be phased out by 2020. Kellogg suspects other municipalities eventually will follow.

About 80 percent of dry cleaners nationally use perc. Many are reluctant to move away from the solvent because they feel it cleans garments better and there are significant costs associated with converting to new technologies, according to the International Fabricare Institute, an association of professional dry cleaners. For these reasons, the percent of non-perc dry cleaners has only grown three to five percent in recent years, the IFI said.

Locally, perc has caused problems in at least four instances. In addition to the two sites recently identified on North Meadow Street at 313 and 507, a spill at Lansing's Colonial Cleaners, identified in 1990, found 30 years of "careless operating procedures" led to perc contamination in the soil and nearby wells. After installing two mitigation systems and extending the municipal water supply, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation declared in 2001 that no further action was necessary at the site.




Perc can also be used as a degreaser of metal. Records found by Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting show that a compound containing perc was likely used at the former Morse Chain plant in Ithaca.

The DEC considers it a site-related compound in their ongoing investigation of off-site contamination related to a leak found in 1987. When homes downhill from the factory, now owned by Emerson Power Transmission, recently had their indoor air tested, some homes tested positive for perc, though many were below the state threshold.

Reflecting on this laundry list of problems and his move away from perc, Kellogg said simply, "I have no regrets."

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