

Press Release

Over 11,000 Americans Tell EPA to Clean Up Toxic Dry Cleaners

Cleaner, safer alternatives available, but EPA refuses ban of cancer-causing solvent

March 23, 2006

Washington, D.C. -- Over 11,000 Americans have petitioned EPA to adopt stronger protections from toxic chemicals released by dry cleaners nationwide. Environmental groups, pollution experts and dry cleaners themselves agree that a phase out of the harmful chemical perchloroethylene (PCE, or perc), a solvent used primarily by the dry cleaning industry, is feasible and vital to reducing serious health and environmental threats.

The wave of comments were lodged to protest EPA's proposed decision to leave millions of Americans at risk from toxic perc emissions. More than 27,000 dry cleaners across the country still use old machines that clean clothes with PCE. Although some cleaners have successfully switched to non-toxic alternatives like wet cleaning, EPA in a proposed rule issued last December refused to consider a phase out of PCE machines. The agency has classified PCE as a probable cancer-causing chemical that has been linked to liver, kidney and central nervous system damage. Over half of federally identified Superfund sites are contaminated with PCE.

"PCE can be phased out and replaced with machines that work as effectively and do not pose the serious health and environmental threat," said Jane Williams, a national leader and air toxics expert for the Sierra Club. "EPA is ignoring these possibilities and the evidence that shows alternatives exist and actually work. There are so many dry cleaners in so many towns that EPA should be making a phase out of PCE a top priority."

Because PCE dry cleaners are located throughout neighborhoods in virtually every city and town in America, millions of Americans are exposed to their toxic emissions. In many cities, dry cleaners operate in the same buildings where peoples' homes, schools, and day care centers are located. People are exposed to PCE through breathing emissions from dry cleaners and also through breathing emissions that are released over time from the clothes that are cleaned at dry cleaners.

Although EPA has acknowledged that the health risks from PCE dry cleaners are extremely high, the agency's recently proposed regulations do almost nothing to address these risks. In particular, EPA failed even to consider a phase out of PCE use that would reduce the health risks to zero. Remarkably, EPA reached this conclusion even after acknowledging that PCE-free alternatives would be cost effective. During the rulemaking process, EPA met repeatedly with representatives of the companies that sell PCE, but made no effort to contact affected communities to learn their concerns.

In California, the South Coast Air Quality Management District approved a phase out in 2003 of PCE that will eliminate PCE dry cleaners in the southern California region by 2020. As old machines break down and need replacing, dry cleaners are purchasing newer, cleaner machines running on less toxic solvents. EPA does not explain anywhere in its rule why Americans in the rest of the country should be deprived of the protections that such a ban will provide.

Wet cleaning machines use water and other nontoxic detergents when cleaning clothes. Carbon dioxide cleaners actually use captured CO₂ to clean clothing and certain materials.

Peter Sinsheimer, director of the Pollution Prevention Center for the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College said, "Our research has shown that perc dry cleaners can successfully switch to non-toxic technologies."

Some dry cleaners have successfully switched to non-PCE machines. Frank Shaghafi, the owner of Blue Sky Cleaners in California, now operates only wet cleaning machines and machines that use captured carbon dioxide. "My employees feel better, our clothes are coming out just as clean and we know that we are not putting this toxic chemical into the environment," Shaghafi said. "We've received interest from other dry cleaners and are receiving clothes from all over the world to clean

with these machines. Small businesses such as dry cleaners can protect the environment and can do so without any major economic burdens."

Contact:

Jane Williams, Sierra Club, (661) 273-3098

Peter Sinsheimer, Occidental College, (323) 259-1420

James Pew / Keri Powell, Earthjustice, (202) 667-4500

Earthjustice 426 17th Street, Oakland, CA 94612 | 1.800.584.6460 | info@earthjustice.org

Earthjustice is a non-profit public interest law firm dedicated to protecting the magnificent places, natural resources, and wildlife of this earth and to defending the right of all people to a healthy environment. We bring about far-reaching change by enforcing and strengthening environmental laws on behalf of hundreds of organizations and communities.

