

ENVIRONMENT: LAUNDRY LOWDOWN

Coming clean on 'organic' solution

Dry cleaners are touting a petroleum-based process as an alternative to harsh chemicals, but does that make it green?

DAVID ANDREATTA

August 10, 2007

When architect Peter Tovell dropped off a handful of clothes at his Toronto dry cleaner recently, he left feeling confident that one thing would not be there when he picked them up.

"It won't have that chemical smell that a lot of dry cleaning has," said Mr. Tovell, who attributes the difference in odour to his cleaner being one of a small but growing number offering "organic" cleaning.

The "organic" trend began in the produce aisle, then trickled into cosmetics, clothing and pet supplies. Now, dry cleaning is on the laundry list of goods and services being marketed as organic to an eco-conscious public hungry for all things green.

While the label has generated buzz and revenue, the term has wrinkled the noses of industry leaders and organic watchdogs who say dry cleaning and "organic" are as compatible as bleach and blue jeans.

Spurred by health concerns and public outcry over perchloroethylene, the solvent they have traditionally used, more of Canada's 3,000 cleaners are embracing alternatives billed as less harmful to the environment.

One of those substitutes is a petroleum-based solvent that is not only considered more ecologically friendly, but, users say, is justifiably called "organic" because petroleum is extracted from the earth.

Not everyone is buying it.

"There's a little bit of greenwashing going on here," said Chris Wolnik, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention. "The problem is there's no real standard that says, 'This is what an organic dry cleaner is.' It's a marketing tool."

Despite the criticism, with traditional cleaning solvents under fire, banners and posters touting "organic dry cleaning" have recently sprung up in the windows of cleaners in some North American cities.

And they are making a splash much the same way a silicone-based solvent marketed under the name GreenEarth Cleaning did a few years ago. Droplets of that solvent attach themselves to the grime embedded in fabric and remove it when the solvent is extracted.

"A lot of our new customers come because they see the sign in the window," said Nancy Chung, manager of New Way Cleaners in Toronto, which spent \$100,000 on a machine that uses petroleum-based solvent and advertises as an organic dry cleaner.

Ms. Chung said that while the label draws customers such as Mr. Tovell, it is the superior service of the cleaning process that keeps them coming back. "It's biodegradable and easier on clothing and doesn't give off those harsh smells," she said.

The "harsh smells" are a byproduct of perchloroethylene, the solvent of choice among most cleaners. Perc, as it became known, was introduced in the 1930s as a safer and superior alternative to petroleum, which is highly flammable.

It is still regarded in the industry as the best cleaning agent on the market. But studies have linked perc to cancer, and its use has been increasingly regulated by the federal and local governments in Canada and the United States.

In May, the Toronto Board of Health called for perc to be phased out. Legislators in New York State followed suit in June after traces of perc showed up in drinking water in New York City. California prohibits dry cleaners from installing new machines that use perc.

In a sense, the use of petroleum takes the industry back to its roots. Legend has it that a petroleum-based fluid once spilled over a grease-stained tablecloth, and when it evaporated the stains were gone.

Whether it is "organic" is a matter of debate.

"Organic is an agricultural process," Organic Trade Association spokeswoman Barbara Haumann said. "Petroleum doesn't count as an organic ingredient."

Chris Tebbs, a Calgary resident and executive director of the International Drycleaners Congress, an industry advocacy group, said cleaners are capitalizing on petroleum being classified as an organic compound.

"Technically, from a chemistry standpoint, it's organic. But it's a little bit meaningless," said Mr. Tebbs, arguing that petroleum can release smog particles into the air and uncontained silicone can be toxic. "Being honest about it, all solvents are toxic."

Perc is considered a suspected carcinogen in Canada and the United States, and Environment Canada is currently assessing GreenEarth Cleaning to determine whether management practices for its use should be devised.

Celia Wong, who oversees the regulations affecting the dry cleaning industry, said the ministry has no current plan to regulate the use of petroleum in dry cleaning. But she warned that petroleum, like other solvents, could be hazardous if not properly contained.

"If you don't have good management practices, you always have the concern of possible problems," Ms. Wong said. "None of these chemicals should be in the environment."

Still, converts to organic dry cleaning regard it as a step forward to a greener world.

"I shared the skepticism," said Mr. Tovell, who sought out an environmentally friendly dry cleaner when he relocated to Toronto from Calgary two years ago. "But it's a starting point and we have to start somewhere."

Laundry list of options

Perchloroethylene cleaning

Introduced in the 1930s as a safer and superior cleaning agent than petroleum, "perc" is now considered a suspected carcinogen in Canada and the United States. Its use in dry cleaning is heavily regulated although it remains the industry's cleaner of choice.

GreenEarth cleaning

Dry cleaners who employ this technique often advertise their services as being "green." The technique uses a silicone-based solvent that is currently accepted as being more environmentally friendly than perc, although Environment Canada is assessing the service to determine whether it should be regulated.

Petroleum-based

'organic' cleaning

The original dry cleaning chemical, petroleum fell out of favour in the industry in the 1930s because of its flammable nature. The petroleum used by today's dry cleaners is a synthetic that is much less combustible. Like GreenEarth, petroleum-based solvents are not regulated. Whether they are "organic" or not is a topic of debate. A major manufacturer of the solvent is Exxon Mobil.

David Andreatta