Dry cleaner sought to test green option

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You pick up your cleaned and pressed silk dress or wool sport coat from a dry cleaner and you’ve left the dirt behind.

But those cleaners in some cases have left their own stains behind in the form of hazardous waste sites born from contamination by perchloroethylene or some other chlorinated solvent.

Now the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute, housed at Rochester Institute of Technology, using $65,000 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, has started a new effort to push a “green” form of dry cleaning called wet cleaning.

The New York State Professional Wet Cleaning Program has been surveying dry cleaners around New York state and next plans to find two operations — one upstate and one downstate — willing to convert solely to wet cleaning. Those two then would be studied for a year as they operate.

Water is the enemy of fabrics like wool or silk, causing them to swell in ways that damage the material. Traditional dry cleaning uses solvents that do not cause swelling in the fabric. Wet cleaning — a water-based system that is analogous to what your basement washer and dryer do — use biodegradable protection surfactants intended to protect the fabric, as well as such mechanical touches as moisture-sensing that stops the dryers before the moisture is completely gone so materials don’t shrink.

Wet cleaning is just one alternative to perc-based dry cleaning. Others include petroleum-based products such as DF-2000, the Green Earth process that uses a silicon-based solvent, and liquid carbon dioxide. Few cleaners employ just one cleaning system, said Kate Wimpeck, an environmental health and safety specialist with the state Pollution Prevention Institute.

One of the key questions the Professional Wet Cleaning Program hopes to answer is whether dry cleaning businesses can survive on the wet cleaning process alone or how much of their laundry would require some alternative, she said.

“It’s a great adjunct to whatever you’re doing in your store,” said Ann Hargrove, director of special projects at the National Cleaners Association, a dry cleaning trade organization.

“We can wet clean a lot more than we can wet clean right now. The problem is the people who say you can do it all (with wet cleaning). If it was without problems, we’d have thousands of wet cleaners,”

One area cleaner, Leary’s Cleaners in Pittsford, offers wet cleaning, according to the Pollution Prevention Institute.

The drawbacks to wet cleaning include increased labor costs as the process is manpower-intensive, and the fact some materials such as rayon and velvet cannot be wet cleaned, said Hargrove, who in 1995 ran a wet-clean-only store in Chicago for a year as part of an EPA demonstration project.

The Pollution Prevention push comes as perc use in dry cleaning is on the decline as dry cleaners are heading to alternatives, Hargrove said.

According to the state Department of Environmental Conservation, there are 16 active or remediated hazardous waste sites in Monroe County from dry cleaners or industrial laundries that may have used perc or other chlorinated solvents.

While some cleaners today still use perc, Hargrove said, “they’re using it with vapor barrier rooms, and they’re checking for leaks on a daily basis.

New York is one of the most regulated states in the entire country when it comes to dry cleaners. These dry cleaners have to be educated, they have to take classes.”

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