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California air regulators ban toxic dry-cleaning chemical

By Samantha Young

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SACRAMENTO – California air regulators on Thursday enacted the nation's first statewide ban of the most common chemical used by dry cleaners.

By 2023, no more dry-cleaning machines that use the toxic solvent – perchloroethylene – will be permitted in the state.

The regulation by the California Air Resources Board begins to phase out the fluid next year, banning dry cleaners from buying machines that rely on the solvent. The state's 3,400 dry cleaners who now use it must get rid of machines that are 15 years or older by July 2010.

“Dry cleaners have known this is a problem for quite some time,” board member Dorene D'Adamo said. “There is a cost to society, and believe me taxpayers are paying for it.”

The rule was approved unanimously by the seven-member board and was embraced by environmental and health advocates. They urged the air board to accelerate the ban because of the chemical's health effects as a potential carcinogen. The solvent has contaminated one in 10 wells in California.

Meanwhile, cleaners said eliminating the most common dry cleaning solvent could drive them out of business because alternative methods are unproven and more costly.

“It could shut down some mom-and-pop operations – the little guys that can't afford it,” said Bob Blackburn, president of the California Cleaners Association.

The cost of converting could be significant for dry cleaners, 85 percent of which are small business with a slim profit margins. Replacing a machine that uses perchloroethylene can cost between \$41,500 and \$175,000.

What will the changes mean for customers? The air board estimates that the additional expense of the new equipment will boost a \$15 bill between \$1.20 to \$1.60.

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What alternative should be allowed in California is still under debate. Dry cleaners that have made the switch to other systems sought to sway the board in favor of their preferred choice.

Although the air board did not endorse a substitute, the regulation would give cleaners a \$10,000 incentive to buy a machine that uses carbon dioxide or a so-called wet cleaning system.

Environmentalists urged the board to ban the most common alternative, which uses hydrocarbons. Critics said it could lead to increased ozone pollution.

“It seems to me there needs to be some clarity,” said air board member Ron Rogers, a San Diego County supervisor. “I think some of the primary options are really questionable at best.”

The board's vote follows similar action five years ago by the South Coast Air Quality Management District in Southern California. That agency became the first regulatory body in the country to ban perchloroethylene, forcing more than 2,000 dry cleaners to stop using the chemical by 2020.

Last year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned the chemical for dry cleaners located in residential buildings nationwide by 2020. But those operations are a small fraction of the nation's cleaners, said Jon Meijer, vice president of the International Fabricare Institute, an industry association based in Maryland.

In California, for example, only 50 of the state's 5,210 dry cleaners operate out of residential buildings.

“Is anyone else doing what California is doing? Absolutely not,” said Sandra Giarde, executive director of the California Cleaners Association.

California declared perchloroethylene a toxic chemical in 1991. State health officials told the air board Thursday that it can cause esophageal cancer, lymphoma, cervical and bladder cancer. The solvent, which has a strong, sweet odor, also can affect the central nervous system.

Business owners disputed those claims.

“We believe perc has served the industry well for many years with no related health problems,” said John Horst, owner of Margaret's Cleaners in La Jolla, which has operated for more than 50 years.

Blackburn, 68, the association president is a second-generation dry cleaner who said his own health was fine.

“The health issue is a non-issue in my book,” he said.

About 70 percent of the state's dry cleaners currently use the chemical and will be affected by the regulation.

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Dry cleaners operating in residential buildings will have to comply sooner, removing their perchloroethylene machines by July 2010. Health advocates want the board to apply the earlier timeline to dry cleaners operating within 300 feet of schools, retirement homes, day cares and medical buildings.

“We're concerned this doesn't protect other sensitive sites,” said Luis Cabrales of the Coalition for Clean Air.

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