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Dry cleaning the regulations

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What do environmentalists, tech firms, bankers and lawmakers of both parties have in common? They are working to help the nation's dry cleaners shift from a highly toxic cleaning agent to safe and healthful alternatives.

Most of the nation's 35,000 dry cleaners currently use perchloroethylene to clean suits, dresses and other fine garments. "Perc" is that familiar odor you smell when you enter a dry cleaner or remove the plastic wrapper from a freshly cleaned garment.

Unfortunately this chemical is highly toxic. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has upgraded perchloroethylene from a "possible" cause of cancer to a "probable" cause of cancer in humans.

Exposure to elevated levels of perchloroethylene can affect the nervous system, causing dizziness, fatigue, headaches and reduced coordination. EPA also reports that people who breathe in perc may experience dysfunction of the liver and kidneys.

If you wear a perc-cleaned jacket or blouse, you are inhaling this chemical. Scientists have also established that perchloroethylene can be passed from a nursing mother through breast milk to her infant.

Millions of us are being exposed. Perchloroethylene readily evaporates into air and is difficult to contain. Evidence from a 1998 EPA report indicates that people who work in dry cleaners and who live in apartments above dry cleaners are often exposed to unhealthy levels of perchloroethylene in the air they breathe.

In addition, the evidence shows a large percentage of dry cleaners have released perc into the ground, where it leaks into underground water supplies. A release from a single dry cleaner can devastate a municipal water supply and saddle a shopping center owner or the public with a cleanup bill exceeding a million dollars.

Federal, state and local governments have long recognized the risks associated with perchloroethylene and have imposed numerous regulations on dry cleaners. Unfortunately this approach, while burdensome to an industry dominated by "ma and pa" shops, has failed to prevent significant exposures, serious accidents and contamination of groundwater.

The answer is not tougher regulations but to get dry cleaners out of the perc business entirely.

There are now two safe and healthful commercially available processes that make this goal completely feasible. They are wet cleaning and liquid carbon dioxide. EPA has recognized these two processes as environmentally preferable alternatives to perc. Water and carbon dioxide are benign ingredients vital to life.

Despite the overwhelming benefits of safe alternatives, dry cleaners will need help to make the change. The transition to new cleaning processes will be expensive - especially for the many small family-owned businesses that operate on very slim margins.

This is why a bipartisan group of legislators have introduced H.R. 1303 and S. 1939, bills that give dry cleaners a 20 percent tax credit to firms that invest in liquid carbon dioxide or in wet cleaning.

Of course, tax credits will require government spending. But as two bipartisan backers of the House bill, Reps. Donald Manzullo, Illinois Republican, and Carolyn McCarthy, New York Democrat, told their colleagues at a recent hearing, those costs would be far outweighed by avoiding the enormous expenditures needed to clean up properties and groundwater contaminated by dry cleaning solvents.

The costs of groundwater cleanup are staggering. North Carolina alone stands to spend from \$72 million to \$90 million each year to clean up perc contamination. The State of Florida estimates it will take almost \$1.5 billion to restore 2,700 perc-contaminated dry cleaning sites. It is no wonder that landlords are beginning to prohibit the use of perc in their shopping centers and that most banks no longer make loans available to traditional dry cleaners.

This House and Senate targeted tax credit bills are strongly supported by environmentalists and advocates of public health, by high tech innovators, banks, by the wet cleaning industry and by dry cleaners that want to make the switch.

Passage of cost-effective targeted tax credits is the best way to empower America's garment cleaning industry to invest in non-toxic and non-combustible wet cleaning and liquid CO₂. The other choice - trying to control perc - is too dangerous and too expensive. We owe it to future generations not to perpetuate technologies that rely on hazardous chemicals.

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