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A health and environmental profile of the dry cleaning industry in King County, Washington

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Abstract

Workers in the dry cleaning industry are exposed to a variety of harmful solvents, and poor work practices can result in extensive environmental contamination. Of particular concern is perchloroethylene (PERC), which is the most commonly used cleaning solvent. This chlorinated hydrocarbon is a pervasive environmental contaminant and a probable human carcinogen. PERC is also a neurotoxin and is toxic to the liver and kidneys. The study described here was comprised of key informant interviews, site visits, and a countywide business survey. The 64% response rate to the survey suggests that the results are likely representative of King County's dry cleaning industry. Dry cleaning was determined to be dominated by small, Korean-owned, family-run businesses. Although the use of PERC as the primary dry cleaning agent has decreased in recent years, this solvent is still used by the majority of businesses. This industry would benefit from regulatory intervention in concert with an educational campaign and enhanced technical and financial assistance. For any intervention to be effective, however, it must account for the unique financial and demographic characteristics of this industry.

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