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Dry cleaners find toxins on property



Contractors clear out 120 tons of soil contaminated by perchloroethylene

By Mercedes Rodriguez

Steve Arthur, owner of Bloomington Cleaners, recently had his business crawling with tiny backhoes and excavators, with workmen tearing up the concrete, all to remove a dangerous chemical from the property.

Arthur closed up the dry cleaning business he has owned since 1992 the week of June 30, and had 120 tons of soil contaminated by perchloroethylene—known as perc — trucked away. “Part of it was being a good citizen, and part of it is protecting the value of the property,” Arthur said.

The building on West 17th Street has been a dry cleaners for more than 35 years, Arthur said, and years ago some dry cleaning chemicals could have leaked from old machinery or been spilled.

He said he became concerned about perc contamination after attending an Indiana Department of Environmental Management meeting on the matter and decided to check into it.

Perc is partly derived from chlorine. Short-term exposure to large amounts of perc can cause problems with the nervous system, according to

the U.S. National Library of Medicine. Some people who drink water containing excessive amounts of perc over many years could have problems with their liver and may have an increased risk of getting cancer, according to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency fact sheet.

Modern dry cleaning machines, like the ones Arthur has now, seal the perc entirely within their big rotating drums.

“In the old days, we would have had a dry cleaning machine, there would have been a still sitting beside it, a refrigeration unit and even a barrel of perc sitting on the floor,” he said. “We have virtually zero contact with perc now.”

Instead of water as in standard washing, perc is used to remove dirt from clothes in the dry cleaning process. It is removed from the clothes by a temperature and chemical process.

In late 2006, Arthur contacted Enviroforensics, an Indianapolis environmental cleanup firm.

“The only real practical approach was excavation of the soil,” said Enviroforensics owner Stephen Henshaw.

Henshaw’s workers tore out huge sections of floor inside the building and parts of the parking lot to clean up soil found to be contaminated by perc. They had to take out all the soil down to the bedrock.

Henshaw said his team did not find significant impact from that site to the ground water.



“We had guys working 18-hour days, right through the Fourth of July,” said Henshaw.

Government oversight

If there is a known spill or accidental dumping of perc, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management requires cleaners to report it and to conduct an environmental investigation into the impact of that action, said Amy Hartstock, public information officer for the agency.

They do not actively monitor dry cleaning sites for spills. But “when properties change hands, it’s not uncommon for there to be some sort of review of the history of a facility to make sure there’s nothing unforeseen when the property changes hands,” she said.

Perc contamination is not uncommon. “We do more dry cleaners than anybody ... part of it is that it’s a niche market we focused on, and part of it is that really all dry cleaners have problems, mostly from the old days,” said Henshaw.

More information is available by calling 866.888.7911 or visiting www.enviroforensics.com.