

DIRTY GEAR

It's No Badge of Courage by Haley Jorgensen

Some fire departments think it's a badge of courage to have soot-covered gear," says Fire Chief John Childs of Sterling Heights Fire Department in Sterling Heights, Mich. Soiled gear, however, can expose firefighters to toxins and carcinogens that enter the body through ingestion, inhalation or absorption, according to the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). Such exposure, says NFPA, "can add up over time and cause health problems."

To ensure the safety of American firefighters the NFPA recommends fire departments clean dirty gear after exposure to fire, body fluids or hazardous materials. Childs, who is responsible for the safety of more than 100 career firefighters, takes NFPA recommendations seriously. That's why he requires soiled turnout gear be properly cleaned using the department's on-premise Continental Pro-Series™ washer-extractor.

Soiled gear is a health risk

Wearing soiled gear puts firefighters—and anyone they come in contact with—at risk, Childs maintains. That's why NFPA warns against cleaning gear in homes or public laundries. NFPA specifications also rule out drycleaning as a method of decontaminating gear.

As a result, Argentine Township Fire and Rescue, in Linden, Mich., requires its 22 on-call firefighters to also clean soiled gear using the firehouse's industrial Continental washer-extractor. "You don't know what you get into with fires in today's world," says Argentine's Chief Engineer John Cross, a veteran firefighter of 30 years.

As first responders, Argentine's firefighters are regularly exposed to blood, body fluids, hazardous spills and contaminants from fire.

At Sterling Heights, a department trained for fire rescue, advanced life support and hazardous materials response, the same holds true. Like most fire chiefs, ensuring safety is Childs' first priority. Dirty gear, in his mind, is unsafe gear.

Not only can grimy gear cause health problems, soiled ensembles reflect less radiant heat and are more likely to ignite and conduct electricity, according to the NFPA.

Without proper cleaning, contaminants and particulate matter "impede and break down the flame-retardant fabric of protective gear," Childs says. "We purchase top-notch stuff and it should be cleaned to maintain its fire-retardant integrity."

Extending gear life

Sterling Heights used to clean gear in buckets of soap and water, or by scrubbing it with a long-handled brush. "It wasn't the right way to do it," says Childs.

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Proper cleaning removes particles that can break down the gear, according to Jeff Quail of Eagle Star Equipment, a Continental distributor in Troy, Mich. Quail worked with both fire departments to select, install and program their washer-

extractors. As a result of proper cleaning, turnout suits—which cost up to \$1,200 per set—should last significantly longer, he says. In turn, fire departments save money.

Soft-mount washers—easier to install; higher extract

Newport Fire Department in Newport, R.I., installed a Continental washer-extractor in order to better adhere to NFPA guidelines, according to Lt. Anthony O'Connors. Washing gear by hand or in the department's topload washer wasn't cutting it anymore. "We needed a heavier duty machine," says O'Connors. "We needed to get something to make it easier to meet NFPA requirements."

With the help of Automatic Laundry Service, a Continental distributor in West Newton, Mass., Newport—like Sterling Heights and Argentine—installed a Continental Pro-Series high-performance washer-extractor because of its flexible microprocessor control, programmable extract speeds and soft-mount design.

Unlike traditional hard-mount washer-extractors, which must be bolted to reinforced concrete foundations, Continental's soft-mount design allows for installations in existing spaces, without need for a new concrete slab or bolting down. "Typically there's not a lot of extra room in a fire-house," says Doug Jones of Automatic Laundry. "Continental's soft-mount design allows for efficient installations in utility rooms or truck bays—wherever there's some extra space."

Argentine Township realized the benefits of the Continental's soft-mount design after replacing its old hard-mount washer-extractor. "It vibrated so much it snapped the bolts and water lines," says Cross of the old machine. "There wasn't enough flex in the system."

Plus, Cross reports Argentine's turnout gear took too long to dry after being washed. "We'd pull the gear out of the washer and water would run off it," he says. "It comes out of the Continental damp—I could wear it if I needed to."

Now, with the Continental washer-extractor, all three fire departments report that gear air dries in less time—only three or four hours, according to Cross. The soft-mount Continentals remove more water from a load than hard-mount models because they reach extract speeds up to 387 G-force. Most hard-mount washers only produce speeds of 85-150 G-force.

High extract is important, says O'Connors, especially for operations with only one set of gear per firefighter. The department's old sink-washing method left gear wet for four days, he says. As a result, Newport had to wait to wash gear when firefighters were scheduled for vacations. Now they clean gear while they're on duty because it dries so much faster.

Easy to operate and program

Ease-of-use and programmability are important features of a firehouse washer-extractor, since firefighters are responsible for getting their gear clean. That's why Argentine Township's Continental is programmed to automatically inject the right detergent and chemicals at the appropriate water temperature and time. That way, turnout gear, jumpsuits and truck towels—which require different water temperatures, extract speeds and chemicals—are cleaned automatically and properly every time.

Continental's automatic chemical injection "takes the guesswork out" for the department's 22 firefighters, says Cross. "It's pretty much dumb proof. All you do is select the program you need and push start."

Clean gear, according to Cross, O'Connors and Childs is critical to firefighter and public safety. "We don't fight fires for a living," says Cross of Argentine's on-call firefighters. "We all have other jobs, so if we get hurt it could take us away from our regular jobs and the ability to support our families."

Having an on-premise washer-extractor, he adds, "is a cheap price to pay for safety.

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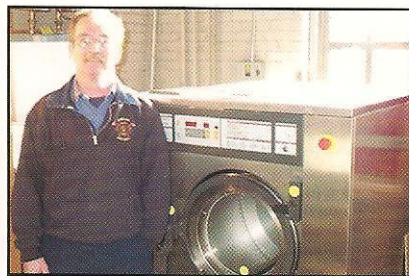
Continental Girbau, Inc. is a world-renowned provider of commercial and industrial laundry equipment and laundry

production systems.

Continental's Pro-Series washers are available in 18- to 255-pound capacities and are backed by the company's 5/3-year limited parts warranty. For more information about Continental products, or to locate a distributor in your

area, visit www.cont-girbau.com or call 800-256-1073. To view NFPA's 1851 standard regarding the cleaning and decontamination of protective gear, visit www.wfirfire.com/website/clothing/access/nfpa.htm#clean.

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Upper left: Lt. Anthony O'Connors of Newport Fire Dept. with the department's 55-pound capacity Pro-Series washer-extractor. Upper right: Sterling Heights Fire Dept. Lower right: Sterling Heights Fire Dept. Captain Richard Choate and Chief John Childs with the department's 30-pound capacity Pro-Series washer-extractor.

