

An Issue of Safety:

Why Industrial Washers Often Qualify for Grant Dollars

By Haley Jorgensen

The Assistance to Firefighter Grant Program (AFGP) offers millions in grants to fire departments nationally to improve firefighter safety. Each year, more and more fire departments receive grant dollars to purchase industrial washer-extractors. It's an issue of safety.

Soiled gear is potentially combustible, according to Steve Klopfenstein, assistant chief at Shabbona Fire Protection District in Shabbona, Ill. It exposes firefighters to health hazards, and rather than protecting the wearer during a fire, soiled gear can ignite and conduct electricity. That's why Klopfenstein's volunteer-run fire department applied for grant dollars to purchase a Continental front-loading Pro-Series™ Washer-Extractor.

"One of the big concepts with the grant is if you purchase something, they want to make sure it can be taken care of," he says. "For the 2004 grant, we submitted an application for new fire gear and a washing machine." The department received funds for both.

Choosing the right washer-extractor, according to Klopfenstein, ensures turnout gear is properly cleaned and quickly returned to service. That's why the firehouse turned to Haiges Machinery in Huntley, Ill., for help. Harry Ernst, the company's on-premise laundry specialist, recommended and installed an 18-pound capacity Continental Pro-Series Washer-Extractor in the firehouse apparatus bay.

"Honestly, we weren't cleaning gear as often as we should have," admits Klopfenstein, whose department had previously drycleaned gear. "But with a small volunteer fire department, funds are tight. The new washer is a huge benefit to us."

Thanks to proper cleaning, Klopfenstein says the department's costly gear—at around \$2,000 per person—will last longer. "When soils are in the gear, it causes it to break down faster," he says. More importantly, by properly cleaning gear, the department is working to keep firefighters safe.

The Dangers of Dirty Gear

Particulates on gear, such as soot and ash, collect hazardous chemicals that come out of a fire, according to Jeffrey Stull, who is among the industry's leading independent experts in the field of personal protective equipment. In a recent article, Stull maintains soiled gear can reflect less radiant heat, become more flammable and conduct electricity.

Studies reveal clean gear is a firefighter's best protection against dangerous biohazards and carcinogens—products of fires and accidents.

That's why proper decontamination of protective clothing is mandated by the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA), and why more and more departments are relying on industrial washers that can be programmed to clean gear according to manufacturers' guidelines.

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Benefits of a Programmable, Soft-mount Washer

But, not all washers are created equal, according to Ernst, whose recommended and sold more and 200 washer-extractors to fire departments throughout Illinois and Indiana. "Hard-mount washers won't reach sufficient extract speeds to remove enough water from turnout gear liners," he says. "And, hard-mount machines must be bolted to a reinforced foundation. This means gear won't air dry as quickly and installations can be more expensive."

Alternatively, soft-mount washers offer highly programmable controls and the flexibility to use high or low extract depending on if a department is washing absorbent gear liners, or outer shells. The NFPA recommends liners and shells be washed separately.

"I recommend fire houses wash the shells using a low rate of extraction—40-80 G-force," says Ernst. "When we wash the liners, which can hold as much as 10 times their weight in water, I recommend extract speeds of 300 G-force to remove more water and expedite air-drying."

The nice thing about the Continental Pro-Series line of soft-mount washers is their ability to be programmed for today's gear or emerging protective fabrics still on the horizon, adds Ernst.

At the State of Connecticut Fire Academy, in Windsor Locks, a new Continental Pro-Series Washer-Extractor is now on-hand for the Academy's 156 instructors/firefighters. The Academy trains 14,000 firefighters per year, and in doing so, makes proper decontamination of protective apparel a critical part of its curriculum. By thoroughly decontaminating turnout gear, instructors model good behavior, according to Mark Lewandowski, deputy director of training.

Programmability & Consistent Clean

To determine which machine fit the Academy's needs, Lewandowski turned to Automatic Laundry Service in West Newton, Mass. The Academy installed a 55-pound, soft-mount Continental Pro-Series Washer-Extractor, not just because Continental is a state-approved manufacturer. Rather, according to Lewandowski, the decision was based on ease of use, serviceability and positive referrals from other fire departments. "Because we have a transient workforce, we needed to make things as simple as possible," he says. Highly programmable controls ensure gear is consistently cleaned—according to manufacturers' guidelines—each time.

"All you have to do is press a button and gear is washed and cleaned as it should be," says Lewandowski. "It takes operator error right out of the game."

Similarly, the 32 volunteer firefighters at Stillman Valley Fire Protection District, in Stillman Valley, Ill., are grateful for a new 18-pound capacity Continental machine. "The only thing we had before was a regular top-load washing machine," says Chief Brian Kunce. "It's just not adequate to wash turnout gear. It didn't do a good job. That's not good, because carcinogens stay in the gear."

Air-drying in Hours not Days

To ensure consistent results, each of the firehouses programmed their Continental soft-mount washer-extractors to handle liners, shells, ambulance bedding and shop towels separately, using different variations of water temperature and levels, baths, rotation, chemicals and extract speeds. Operators simply enter a program number and press start. Cleaning chemicals are automatically injected at the right water level, temperatures and cycles to eliminate user error and waste.

At Stillman Valley, turnout gear liners are washed using high extract to remove more water—dramatically reducing dry-time. Shells are handled at a lower extract to preserve fabric integrity. Installed in the department's truck bay, Stillman Valley's soft-mount washer offers ease of installation and future flexibility because it isn't bolted to a foundation.

"Gear that's thrown in the washer during the morning is dry by evening," says Kunce. "It's back in service in less than a day's time." It didn't used to be the way using the department's old topload. Gear took two or three days to dry using a fan. "That's a problem when there's only a single set of gear per firefighter," admits Kunce.

Klopfenstein agrees. Getting gear back in service quickly is critical, because a firefighter's best protection is his or her own custom-fit protective apparel. Since

the install of his department's new Continental washer-extractor, Klopfenstein maintains gear air-dries in just a couple of hours.

Thanks to an investment in new Continental washer-extractors, costly turnout gear will likely last longer and offer more thorough protection, according to Kunce, Klopfenstein and Lewandowski. That, they agree, brings added peace of mind.

For a complete listing of NFPA 1851 guidelines, visit www.nfpa.org. To discover more about Continental laundry products, visit www.continentalgirbau.com/firedepartments. Or, call 800-256-1073. To access more on the AFGP grant program, including how to apply, visit www.usfa.fema.gov/grants/afgp/.



Top: Cadet Ashley Klopfenstein and Assistant Chief Steve Klopfenstein of Shabbona Fire Protection District in Shabbona, Ill., with the department's 18-pound capacity Pro-Series Washer-Extractor. Center: Shabbona Fire Protection District

