

Fire department fights ... carcinogens

Laundry equipment helps remove cancer-causing agents from firefighting gear

BY MATT POE, EDITOR

LUGOFF, S.C. — Being a firefighter is a dangerous job.

Fire, smoke, other noxious fumes—there are many hazards these front-line individuals face.

Most people, however, wouldn't think that a firefighter's gear could be a hazard, but it can be and it is.

The gear needs to be laundered properly to remove carcinogens. The Lugoff, S.C., Fire Department learned about this potential health hazard and did something about it.

American Laundry News spent some time with Chief Dennis Ray to talk about the department's recently purchased laundry equipment to help combat carcinogens in the gear.

In fall 2016, the Lugoff Fire Department bought new laundry equipment. Tell us about the new equipment and how it's working for you.

Ray: We purchased a UniMac® 45-pound washer-extractor and the UniMac drying cabinet. Our main reason for purchasing the equipment was to quickly and efficiently decontaminate all of our firefighting gear to get it back in service as quickly as possible.

This is by far the quickest, most efficient way to decontaminate firefighting gear following an incident or fire. Previously, we would send our gear out to other departments to be cleaned, and it would take three to four days. Now it takes five to six hours for the gear to be decontaminated.

Our mission, and what we are trying to accomplish, is that firefighters will never need to put contaminated gear back on their body



Firefighters face carcinogens not just at a fire but even on their own gear. (Photos: Lugoff Fire Department)



The Lugoff Fire Department had to send out its gear to be washed until it received a grant to purchase its own washer-extractor.



The department's new dryer cabinet allows it to dry fire hoses inside the station.

after a fire or incident.

We understand there were many reasons for the upgrade, but the overarching theme was reducing carcinogens in firefighters' gear. How did you learn about the carcinogens?

Ray: The South Carolina Firefighters Association launched a cancer awareness campaign throughout South Carolina. The campaign helps to raise awareness of all the contributing factors to cancer cases in firefighters, not only in the state, but throughout the nation. It brings out variables we can address as fire chiefs to minimize our firefighters' exposure

to cancer-causing agents, which in our business are everywhere.

A lot of people think it is just the smoke that is the biggest cancer-causing substance, and that is very important, but it is basically all of the by-products of fire and combustion that are exposing our firefighters to numerous carcinogens. The contamination on the turnout gear eventually absorbs into the skin.

Even if we do everything right by wearing the proper breathing apparatus and turnout gear, firefighters are still exposed to dangerous carcinogens through the by-products of combustion absorbing into our skin. One of the most recommended ways to protect the firefighters is to decontaminate gear immediately, or as soon as possible, after an incident. Before we had the equipment, we did not have this capability. We had to send our gear out to other departments to be cleaned.

You used a grant to purchase the new equipment. How did you learn about the grant and what was the approval process like?

Ray: This particular grant was a local grant in Kershaw County in South Carolina through a Help Foundation. The grant was advertised through many avenues, primarily through the local newspaper, which is where I learned about it. The grant was to provide funding for health-related deficiencies in agencies. Knowing about the South Carolina Firefighters Association

awareness campaign and cancer in the fire industry, I thought this would be a great opportunity.

We needed to fill out an application for the grant, providing a narrative reasoning for why the equipment was needed and how it is related to healthcare and health related issues. I also gave a 20-minute presentation in front of the grant panel, who evaluated and scored all of the different grant applications and presentations.

We were very fortunate to receive the grant, and they awarded us 100% of our grant request. With the grant, we were able to pay for the equipment in full, the cleaning agents used, and some wiring and plumbing work that needed to be done in order to install and operate the equipment. The grant fully paid for everything we needed for our equipment to be in service as it is today.

We are always looking for grant opportunities and continue to look for them to supplement our tax income. We are fully tax-based and the tax money keeps the firehouse open and operating, but we can be limited and need to be creative to find funding opportunities to meet a lot of the additional needs.

Besides reducing carcinogens, what other benefits have you seen from the new laundry equipment? What other laundry do you use it for?

Ray: The equipment is used

INSIDE:

January 2017 • Vol. 43 | No. 1

[12] Laundry Boiler Maintenance and Safety

Experts share ideas for laundries to keep the heart of the operation producing steam ... safely

[14] NFL Laundries Struggle with Stains as Well

Equipment managers look for ways to remove uniform stains, prevent yellowing, to shine on the field

[22] Career Track

[26] Trade Ticker [27] Calendar of Events

[28] Classified Advertising [29] Source Directory

AMERICAN LAUNDRY NEWS

Publisher

Charles Thompson
Phone: 312-361-1680
E-Mail: cthompson@ATMags.com

Editorial Director

Bruce Beggs
Phone: 312-361-1683
E-Mail: bbeggs@ATMags.com

Editor

Matt Poe
Phone: 231-740-2842
E-Mail: mpoe@ATMags.com

Digital Media Director

Nathan Frerichs
Phone: 312-361-1681
E-Mail: nfrerichs@ATMags.com

Advisory Board

Jim Buik • Richard Griffin
Greg Gurtler • Phil Hart
Janice Larson • Tom Marks
Gerard O'Neill
Richard Warren

Production Manager

Roger Napiwocki

National Sales Director

Donald Feinstein
Phone: 312-361-1682
E-Mail: dfeinstein@ATMags.com

Main Phone: 312-361-1700

Fax: 312-361-1685

Subscriptions

630-739-0900 x100
www.americanlaundrynews.com

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See FD Q&A on Page 14