

The Future of Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning

by Phil Ackland

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ver the next five years, the image of exhaust cleaning is going to change dramatically. The following is just the beginning.

As most attentive exhaust cleaners are aware, in 1998 the NFPA 96 standard adopted the requirement that commercial exhaust systems be inspected and cleaned by Trained, Qualified and Certified (TQC) companies or persons who are acceptable to the authority having jurisdiction.

In the 2004 NFPA 96 Standard, the definitions of "certified," "qualified," and "trained" were further refined:

Certified: A formally stated recognition, and approval of an acceptable level of competency, acceptable to the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ).

Qualified: A competent and capable person or company that has met the requirements and training for a given field, acceptable to the AHJ.

Trained: A person who has become proficient in performing a skill reliably and safely through instruction and practice/field experience, acceptable to the AHJ.

With the responsibility of what is "acceptable" falling squarely upon the authority having jurisdiction, they are now searching for knowledge to fulfill their mandate.

In the fall of 2002, the first Inspecting Kitchen Exhaust Systems Seminar was offered. This two-day seminar for fire and building officials provides fundamental information on how to inspect the installation and the maintenance of exhaust and suppression systems. It also promotes the need for exhaust cleaners to fulfill the three TQC requirements. This ISO 9001 Certified seminar is being recognized by governments at every level throughout the US and Canada. The Inspectors Manual used in the seminars is referenced in the NFPA 96 standard.

As a result of this seminar, fire departments are creating checklists and databases to systematically inspect restaurants. They are also developing public education programs for their local restaurants and cleaners. In the future if an exhaust system cannot be entirely cleaned, it must be reported, in writing. Also crew leaders, not just owners, must have the knowledge to recognize and report serious non-compliant situations in the exhaust system. Restaurant chains are seeing the need and the benefit of using trained and certified exhaust cleaners. The restaurant industry's expectation levels are becoming increasingly demanding.

Finally, and most powerfully, the Fire Investigation in Kitchen Systems Manual (to be published in the summer of 2005) will enlighten the insurance and legal professions. This manual documents the responsibilities of restaurants, installers, and service-providers of fire suppression and exhaust systems. It details points for investigators and attorneys to look for, and questions to ask. Over the next five years, accountability is going to become the key issue in servicing commercial kitchen systems. If a restaurant, installer, or service-provider chooses to play fast-and-loose with fire safety, they can no longer avoid the consequences.

Phil Ackland has been in the commercial kitchen field for nearly 40 years. He is a member of the NFPA 96 Committee and has written a number of books on installing, inspecting and servicing commercial kitchen exhaust systems. He offers training and certification to cleaners, fire and building officials, and the insurance profession. ct