

Certification of Commercial Kitchen Exhaust Cleaners

The new 1998 edition of the National Fire Protection Association Standard #96 *"Standard for Ventilation Control and Fire Protection of Commercial Cooking Operations"* now requires that those who inspect or clean the exhaust systems in restaurant or commercial cooking institutions be "certified." But, what does that mean?

Background

Fire professionals know that the simplest and least expensive way to eliminate the "fire triangle" in a commercial kitchen exhaust system is to remove the fuel load - the grease build-up within the hood, duct and fan. If there is no grease inside the system, there is nothing to sustain fire, should it get up into the duct.

The purpose of this new standard is to bring some degree of accountability and competency to the field of cleaning kitchen ventilation equipment. This exhaust cleaning service has long suffered from an inconsistent and shoddy level of workmanship, leaving both Authority Having Jurisdictions and restaurant owners unsure of what sort of service has been performed.

The NFPA #96 and International Mechanical Code call for all areas of the kitchen exhaust system to be reasonably accessible for inspection and cleaning. If this is the case there is no excuse for cleaning contractors not to do the entire system. But that is not happening. Why?

Because of inadequate policing, the normal job done by many cleaning contractors has been to wash only the inside of the hood and the outside of the fan; in other words, those areas that are clearly visible to restaurant owners and fire inspectors. The cleaners attitude is that no one looks, so why go to the time and effort to clean the entire system. Plus a superficial job takes less time which costs less money meaning more profit.

This cursory service practice has become entrenched as the standard for many contractors (companies). Restaurants, not wanting to put out any more expense than necessary, have in many cases, gone along with this deception.

Improving Fire Safety in Restaurants

The National Fire Protection Association is attempting to address this situation by requiring that inspecting and cleaning contractors provide the AHJ with some sort of proof as to their skills and ability.

NFPA #96 (1998 edition) 8-3.1 and 8-3.1.1 state (in part), "The entire exhaust system shall be inspected (and cleaned) by a properly trained, qualified, and certified company or person(s) acceptable to the authority having jurisdiction in accordance with Section 8-3."

Although this is be a step in the right direction, the challenge for the AHJ is to determine what does 'properly trained, qualified, and certified' mean?

How is the Fire Department to know what sorts of abilities are required to have this work done properly? What levels of competencies should there be to 'certify' someone to inspect or clean commercial kitchen exhaust systems?

The following are points that will assist the AHJ in ensuring that the best fire prevention is taking place in this area.

1. Contact either the contractor or the restaurant and notify them that you want to discuss the service being performed on their restaurant systems. By putting all on notice that you are interested and involved in ensuring the systems are properly serviced, you increase the caliber of service immediately. No cleaner wants to incur the wrath of the fire department.
2. When you contact the cleaning contractors or restaurant owner, ask the following questions:
 - How are you cleaning under the fan?
 - Where are the access panels located? Are you removing them?
 - Are they properly gasketed before being replaced?
 - Do you know the NFPA #96 (and IMC) requirements for cleaning and access panel installation?
 - Do you guarantee in writing that the **entire system** will be clean to **bare metal** according to NFPA #96 8-3.1?
 - Do you pin off the fire suppression system before cleaning the exhaust system? They should **NOT** be doing that!!!
 - What is the condition of the roof area around the fan? Is there a grease build-up?
3. Require all contractors to provide the restaurant with a detailed **written** 'Follow-up Report'* of what was done and **not** done to the ventilation system, not just a service tag. Require the written report be kept on the premise for your review.

Additional Inspection Points:

If possible, have the contractor walk you through the job; have them explain how they will reach all the areas within the duct. If possible tip the fan and ensure all areas can be cleaned.

There are jurisdictions where the fire departments are putting cleaning contractors on notice that they may want to accompany the cleaner on an inspection tour, after the service is performed. This really gets the cleaners attention!

The Value of Certification

The value of certifying commercial kitchen exhaust cleaning contractors will be determined by the Authority Having Jurisdiction and the restaurant industry's willingness to buy into responsible workmanship.

Knowledgeable cleaners will know and understand the responsibility they have to both clean the system completely and report any deficiencies.

If there is a fire, they will be held responsible by the fire department and the insurance company. Being 'Certified' will be seen as meaning that they know what they are doing and what their responsibilities are.

Having the entire system thoroughly cleaned to bare metal will, in many cases, reduce the number of times a year the system will require cleaning, thereby saving the consumer money.

In a growing number of areas, contractors are required to report to the fire department and explain their abilities and reporting procedures before being allowed a business license. This increase in communications will improve both the caliber of the cleaning and help the AHJ have a clearer knowledge of what is going on in his territory.

Some jurisdictions have created a local Licensing or Certification Program with a number of corresponding requirements and qualifying criteria. The jurisdiction (through either city, State or Province) issues a 'license' to qualified exhaust system cleaners, similar to a gas fitter or fire suppression installer. These individuals or companies are then monitored. A lack of continuing education, complaints and inferior workmanship can cause the loss of this license.

Required Skills

Proper and provable training requirements are necessary for the AHJ to determine ability. To safely and completely clean these exhaust systems, contractors need to know a number of diverse skills and procedures such as but not limited to:

- Recognize Life-Safety issues around the ventilation systems such as Clearances to Combustibles and inadequate fire suppression protection
- A clear understanding of the OSHA Safety requirements
- How to properly dispose of wastewater in each jurisdiction to conform to EPA regulations
- How to install proper access and hinge kits to access the entire system
- How to report inadequacies to both the property owner and the AHJ

In an effort to satisfy the Authority Having Jurisdiction concerning this new NFPA #96 Standard, training is becoming available to met these needs.

Conclusion

Requiring accountability from kitchen exhaust cleaners is a new concept and will take some time to implement. Nevertheless, the rewards to both local communities and the State will be reduced fire hazards and improved service compliance, thus providing both the restaurant industry and the fire department with a more reliable safety zone in this area.

*Reproducible forms involving services to these systems are available from the author at no charge.

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*The Inspectors' Edition of **Phil Ackland's Commercial Kitchen Exhaust Systems Manual** retails at \$108.95 usd (incl. shipping and handling).*

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