



Clean Gear – Critical to Firefighter Safety

By: Haley Jorgensen

Firefighters don't know what they're getting into when they go into a fire," says Fire Engineer Kelly Headley of the Sterling Fire Department (Sterling), in Sterling, Colo. "In a structural fire, items like carpet, sealed wood and stain resistant fabrics put out nasty gasses and chemicals. Those carcinogens are very dangerous and so we keep a breathing apparatus on and monitor carbon dioxide levels the whole time. All of those gasses and fire byproducts also get into our protective gear, so it's common practice after a fire for our guys to bring their turnout gear back to the firehouse and wash it."

Dirty Gear Is No Badge of Courage ... It's A Health Risk

Headley, a veteran firefighter of 23 years, insists clean protective gear is as essential to the safety of the Sterling's firefighters, as it is to those they serve. "You can't wear dirty gear and expose yourself and others to what's on the gear," he maintains. "Our gear provides a protective barrier between us and fires, hazardous materials and body fluids," he says. That's important since Sterling's 32 career and part-time firefighters handle emergencies ranging from structural and wildfires to hazardous spills and automobile accidents.

"We used to wash turnout suits and wildland gear in the same top-load washer as bed linens and clothes," says Headley. Not only was the fire chief concerned about cross-contamination issues, according to Headley, he was concerned about wash quality. "The gear is big, heavy and bulky and we could only wash one set of gear in the residential machine at a time. It was hard on the gear and hard on the washer." The firehouse needed a better solution ...

Applying for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant for Proper Laundry Equipment

After researching options for purchasing an industrial front-load washer-extractor—one that would properly clean

turnout gear according to National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) guidelines—Sterling submitted a grant application to the Department of Homeland Security's Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program for a new 30-pound capacity Continental E-Series soft-mount washer-extractor as well as a drying cabinet. They were awarded \$14,200 to cover the purchase.

Because proper cleaning of gear is key to reducing risk to firefighters, Continental washer-extractors qualify for AFG grants. The grants are used by fire departments to increase the effectiveness of firefighting and emergency response operations and to better firefighter health and safety programs. Fire departments, like Sterling, can apply for the grants online at www.firegrantsupport.com.

Selecting a Soft-mount over a Hard-mount Washer

Choosing the right washer-extractor involved a bit of research and assistance from Tom Millman of Washtime Industries, a laundry equipment distributor in Greeley, Colo. The Continental E-Series Washer-Extractor's soft-mount design was important because it didn't require being secured to a new concrete foundation, according to Millman. "If we were to put in a hard-mount washer in the existing work room, we would have had to dig up concrete, making installation more expensive. Continental soft-mount washers can be installed anywhere there is extra space, even in a truck bay or a storage room and in areas with in-floor heat," says Millman.

Headley agrees. "We looked at four different companies and liked the Continental. The big thing was its soft-mount feature





because it's easy to pull out if there are maintenance issues," he says.

The Importance of Advanced Programmability

But programmability of the machine was equally important. A highly programmable washer allows fire departments to easily alter how they wash gear based on changing recommendations and fabric innovations. "You want a washer that can easily be programmed for today's gear or emerging protective fabrics still on the horizon," says Millman. Washing gear according to NFPA recommendations is critical to proper cleaning without fabric damage.

Continental E-Series Washers feature highly programmable controls that allow users programmability of wash process variables, including extract speed (up to 387 G-force), multiple baths, water temperatures, water levels, cylinder rotation options, mechanical action, wash time and automatic chemical injection. By investing in the Continental washer, Sterling properly cleans gear, extending the life of the gear. The new Continental washer was programmed upon installation to clean turnout gear liners and shells according to NFPA guidelines, which suggest that the liners and shells be washed separately; water temperatures do not exceed 105 F; extract speeds do not exceed 100 G-Force; and a mild detergent is used with a Ph level between 10.5 and six.

Simple to Use

Using the washer may sound complicated, but it is really very easy, according to Headley. "Each firefighter does his own wash," he says. "They just load, push a button and press start. We have three programs. Program one is for outer shells, program two is for liners and program three is for any rags or towels that are

Above: Fire Engineer Kelly Headley of Sterling Fire Department in Sterling, Colo. installed a Continental 30-pound soft-mount washer-extractor — insuring that the department's gear is getting cleaned properly and protecting his staff of 32 firefighters.

considered a biohazard." The gear is cleaned automatically and properly every time—with the right mix of water temperature, water levels, chemistry and extract speed. So no matter who is doing the wash, the load results are perfectly consistent every time.

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The results are impressive. Not only does the gear come out of the washer cleaner than before, it experiences less wear and tear. Moreover, the new washer handles three sets of liners or shells in one load, while the old topload only accommodated one set. "I think our gear lasts longer because it gets cleaner and the new machine isn't as hard on the fabric," says Headley, "which is important since each set of turnout gear can cost up to \$1,500. It also appears to come out much cleaner. I'm amazed at how ugly the water is

when it drains out of there."

By using the new Continental washer and the drying cabinet in tandem, Headley also maintains gear dries in less than four hours, putting it back into service hours earlier than before ...

And, that's important considering Sterling responds to about 1,500 emergency calls each year. "For a small department we are really fortunate," says Headley of receiving government funds to purchase the laundry equipment. "It's amazing how many government grants are out there to help fire departments just like ours."

To discover more about Continental Girbau laundry equipment, backed by a 5/3-year factory warranty, visit www.continentalgirbau.com/firedepartments or call 800-256-1073.

Continental Girbau, Inc. is a provider of commercial and industrial laundry equipment and laundry production systems. Continental's soft-mount washers featuring G-Drive technology, are available in 20-, 30-, 40-, 55-, 90-, 130-, and 255-pound capacities. All Continental washers meet rigorous environmental and safety standards put forth by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and are backed by the company's 5-Year/3-Year limited parts warranty. For more information about Continental products, or to locate a distributor in your area, call 800-256-1073 or visit www.continentalgirbau.com/firedepartments.