



OFFICE OF THE FIRE MARSHAL SAFETY BULLETIN

Use and Care of Oil-Soaked Rags Group A-2 Occupancies

Fire Hazard Prevention – Improper Storage, Handling, and Laundering of Oily Rags and Linens

PURPOSE

This safety bulletin provides critical guidance for owners, managers, and employees of Assembly Group A-2 establishments restaurants, bars, banquet halls, tasting rooms, and similar facilities—on the prevention of fires caused by improper handling or laundering of oil-soaked rags and linens. These materials are common in kitchens, janitorial areas, and laundry facilities, and are a leading cause of spontaneous combustion fires.

BACKGROUND

Rags and towels used for cleaning fryers, grills, and kitchen equipment often retain cooking oils and grease residues. When such materials are piled, folded, or stored improperly, internal heat builds up, leading to spontaneous ignition. Fires frequently start in mop closets, laundry rooms, or linen storage areas after closing hours. Similarly, uniforms or towels with residual oil can ignite in dryers when temperatures rise.

CODE REQUIREMENTS

- IFC 304.3.1 – Oily Waste Storage: Oily waste, rags, or similar materials subject to spontaneous ignition must be stored in a listed or approved metal container equipped with a self-closing lid.
- IFC 5704.3.3.2 – Housekeeping: Combustible waste materials shall not accumulate in cooking, storage, or service areas.
- NFPA 96 – Ventilation Control and Fire Protection of Commercial Cooking Operations: Grease-laden waste and cleaning materials shall be handled to prevent fire hazards.
- NFPA 1 – Fire Code: Laundry and linen operations must control buildup of oily residues and lint to prevent ignition.

SAFE HANDLING PRACTICES FOR OILY RAGS

1. Use Approved Containers:
 - a. Store all oil-soaked rags in UL-listed metal oily-waste cans with self-closing lids labeled 'Oily Waste Only.'
 - b. Do not use plastic bins, cardboard boxes, or open trash cans.
2. Empty Daily:
 - c. Empty all oily-waste cans at the end of each day into a sealed, non-combustible dumpster away from the building.
 - d. Do not leave oily rags inside overnight.
3. Keep Clearances:
 - e. Maintain a 3-foot (0.9 m) clearance from cooking equipment, water heaters, or gas appliances.
 - f. Avoid storing near mop sinks or under counters.
4. Train Staff:
 - g. Include oily-rag handling and disposal in employee fire-safety orientation and closing procedures.

CAN RAGS BE LAUNDERED AT HOME? No, oily or grease-soaked rags, or towels, should not be laundered at home.

1. Fire Hazard: Home washers and dryers are not designed to handle commercial-level grease or cooking oils. Even after washing, residual oil can remain in the fabric and ignite in the dryer when heat builds up.
 2. Contamination Risk: Commercial kitchen grease, cleaning chemicals, and sanitizers can contaminate household laundry appliances, posing a health and safety concern for family members.
 3. Code and Liability Concerns: While not explicitly prohibited under IFC, best practice and fire-code intent (IFC 304.3.1, NFPA 96 §10.10.6) require proper handling and disposal of grease-laden materials in a controlled commercial environment. Laundering these materials at home could violate permit conditions or insurance policies if a fire occurs.
1. Recommended Practice:
 - Use a commercial laundry or linen service designed for restaurant or industrial materials.
 - On-Site Laundry (If Applicable): Ensure equipment is commercial-rated, lint traps are cleaned after each cycle, and dryer vents are properly exhausted. Never machine wash or dry oily rags inside a food truck or residence.
 - Temporary Rinse Only: Soiled rags may be rinsed in hot, soapy water before collection, but shall not be machine-washed or dried within the restaurant.



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LAUNDRY & LINEN CARE TIPS

1. Pre-Treat and Rinse: Rinse heavily soiled or greasy items in hot, soapy water before washing.
2. Use Commercial-Grade Detergent and Hot Cycles: Wash on the hottest safe setting with degreasing detergent.
3. Dry completely and allow items to cool before folding or storing.
4. Clean Lint Traps Regularly: Clean after every load to prevent ignition.
5. Daily Laundry Removal: Remove all used towels and linens from the food truck each night for proper laundering.

FIRE MARSHAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a daily closing inspection ensuring oily waste containers and laundry bins are empty.
- Maintain Class K fire extinguisher accessible and up to date per NFPA 10.
- Schedule quarterly employee fire-safety training.
- Include oily rag management and laundry fire prevention in your written operating procedures.
- Post this bulletin in the kitchen or staff area as part of your required fire-prevention documentation.

FAILURE TO COMPLY

Improper handling or storage of oil-soaked rags or linens constitutes a fire code violation under IFC 2018 and may result in enforcement action, fines, or suspension of operational permits.

REFERENCE CODES:

International Fire Code 2018 §304.3.1, §5704.3.3.2; NFPA 10; NFPA 96; NFPA 1

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