



OFFICE OF THE FIRE MARSHAL SAFETY BULLETIN

Use and Care of Oil-Soaked Rags in Food Trucks

PURPOSE

This safety bulletin is issued to remind all food truck and mobile food unit operators of the fire hazards associated with oil-soaked rags, towels, and linens. Improper handling, laundering, or disposal of these items can result in spontaneous ignition or fire spread within confined cooking environments.

BACKGROUND

Rags and towels used for wiping fryers, grills, or cleaning grease build-up often retain cooking oils and flammable residues. When stored in piles or confined containers, these residues can heat internally and ignite without an external spark — a process known as spontaneous combustion. In addition, rags or uniforms improperly washed or dried can retain oil residues that ignite in dryers or storage bins.

CODE REQUIREMENTS

- IFC 304.3.1 – Oily Waste Storage: Oily waste, rags, or similar materials subject to spontaneous ignition shall 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 areas used for cooking or fuel storage.
- NFPA 96 – Ventilation Control and Fire Protection of Commercial Cooking Operations: Grease-laden materials must be handled and disposed of properly to reduce the risk of fire.
- NFPA 1 – Fire Code: Laundry operations and waste handling must prevent buildup of oily residues and lint that may ignite.

SAFE HANDLING PRACTICES FOR OILY RAGS

1. Use Approved Containers:
 - a. Store oil-soaked rags in metal oily waste cans with self-closing lids labeled 'Oily Waste Only.'
 - b. Never use cardboard boxes, open trash cans, or plastic bins.
2. Empty Containers Daily:
 - c. Dispose of rags in approved outdoor receptacles each day.
 - d. Do not store oily waste overnight inside the truck or enclosed commissary.
3. Maintain Safe Distance:
 - e. Keep oily rag containers at least 3 feet (0.9 m) from cooking appliances, fryers, or propane tanks.
4. Staff Training:
 - f. All employees should be trained on handling, storage, and disposal of oily waste as part of the daily cleaning checklist.

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.
5. Recommended Practice:
 - Use a commercial laundry or linen service designed for restaurant or industrial materials.
 - If a commissary facility is used, ensure it is approved and properly vented.
 - Never machine wash or dry oily rags inside a food truck or residence.



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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. Thorough Drying: 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.
- Keep a Class K fire extinguisher accessible and up to date per NFPA 10.
- Review fire safety training for all staff at least quarterly.
- Include oily rag management and laundry fire prevention in your written operating procedures.

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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