

## Coming Out in the Wash Protocols for Successful Textile Restoration

*By Chip Bifano*

As the textile restoration niche has gained recognition as a viable component of the property claim process, the procedures for handling specific types of losses have become more refined and standardized, leading to highly professional service and increased restoration success.

Clearly, the importance of interactions with insureds cannot be underestimated. Yet a key to success for textile restoration is the implementation of fundamental methods specific to the type of loss being handled.

With water losses, for example, speed of initial service is absolutely critical. The faster the response and the sooner the restoration process can begin, the higher the success rate will be for the restoration effort. Accordingly, adjusters should consider assigning a textile restorer just as they would a mitigation contractor. Severity increases dramatically as time goes on, as wet garments and other fabric items are susceptible to dye transfer, color bleeding and potential mold growth. Having a textile restoration specialist on-site as soon as possible also enables the garments and other fabric items to be inventoried and removed in an expeditious manner so the mitigation contractor can begin work quickly.

When dealing with a water loss, a professional textile restorer follows a specific protocol that involves separating light-colored items from dark-colored items to prevent dye transfer. At this point, the restorer inspects items to

determine any pre-existing damage or damage caused by the loss that may prevent successful restoration, hanging items in a special drying room before initiating the restoration process. Oftentimes dry clean-only garments are left on hangers so they can be dried and treated with ozone to remove any musty smell before dry cleaning. Washable items should be washed as soon as possible to eliminate any chance of dye transfer or mold development. If dye transfer has already occurred, then restoration still can be attempted on the items because minor dye bleeding can be flushed out during the restoration process. With white fabrics, a chemical agent can be used to remove dye bleeding.

Textile restoration procedures can be effective with all three categories of water losses. (For descriptions of clean, grey, and black water, refer to the sidebar "Murky Water"). In fact, studies have shown that even items affected by black water can be fully restored. However, insureds often insist on replacement of these items, which can become a challenging situation for the adjuster.

### Customized Treatment

In the case of a water loss where mold growth has already begun, protective gear is worn when necessary - both in the field and during processing in the plant. At the textile restoration facility, a properly ventilated storage system prevents cross-contamination of other items. Some wet

fabrics are laundered immediately with a mildewcide for optimal results. Perchloroethylene, also referred to simply as "perc," is the most common cleaning agent in the dry cleaning industry. Perc is extremely effective in the remediation of mold, as it breaks down most of the rigid cellulose "cell walls" of fungi. Germicides can be added to enhance agent's performance and further eradicate mold and fungi. Importantly, a two-bath distillation system then accomplishes the more critical task of removing the toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

When a loss is caused by fire, speed of response comes into play yet again. A fire in a home can produce more than 100 chemical elements from the combustion of synthetic materials, which leads to two types of smoke damage: invisible odor and visible soot. Smoke odor varies widely depending on the material burned—for instance, wood versus plastic, protein versus electrical, and so on.

Smoke also produces two basic pollutants: oxides of nitrogen and carbon particles. When combined with moisture, these elements create nitric acid. Within hours, fabrics can become discolored; within days, fabrics may stain permanently.

The successful removal of contaminants requires a scientific approach and customized treatment, based on four key components:

time, temperature, mechanical action and concentration of cleaning agents. Higher laundering temperature, achievable only with commercial-capacity water heaters, reduces the surface tension of water and accelerates most chemical reactions. As a result, cleaning agents function more efficiently, and the amount of necessary cleaning agents can be reduced. Likewise, proper agitation creates uniform distribution of cleaning agents, leading to enhanced soil suspension and a higher effectiveness of cleaning. A professional textile restorer also will use multiple cleaning formulas specifically designed for restoration that are effective at relatively low temperatures and low pH (meaning more acidic than alkaline) to improve the restoration success rate.

Such a comprehensive approach to textile restoration exemplifies the advantages of a professional compared to a homeowner, even for bulk laundry. Residential laundry equipment simply cannot match the proper temperature and agitation of commercial machines, which also prevent the re-deposition of contaminants. Insureds can even further damage their own textiles by trying to clean the items themselves. Professional handling results in more textiles being salvaged, and this higher success rate reduces costs by preventing the otherwise inevitable replacement of items when a homeowner isn't able to achieve the desired results. The time required both for the homeowner and for the adjuster also must be taken into consideration. Insureds typically are more focused on other areas of their loss related to their immediate living condition, and the burden of having to attempt their own laundry can decrease satisfaction. Similarly, the adjuster also must deal with an insured that isn't prepared to perform textile restoration. There is the further requirement of time to readjust the claim for items that did not respond to home laundering.

### Consider the Contaminant

Professional textile restoration commonly includes treatment with ozone, a deodorizing process that breaks up the smoke molecule to eliminate odor. Ozoning prior to cleaning prevents odor from being set in fabric, and ozone also can be used after an initial cleaning if the claim involves heavy smoke or a higher

degree of contamination. Some textile restorers have begun using ozonated water for washable items, where oxygen is passed through a high voltage field to create ozone. In wash water, ozone reacts chemically with soils, making them soluble in water. The process saves resources because lower temperatures are required for washing, along with fewer rinse cycles and less detergent needed.

Textile restoration specialists also are adept at handling claims involving a range of contaminants, from tear gas to oil and lead. With tear gas contamination, for example, protective gear should be worn on-site, including full mask respirators with cartridges designed for tear gas, gloves, and Tyvek suits. Anyone at the loss must be attentive to avoid on-site use of oils and lotions that can trap the chemicals. Typical textile restoration methods include the use of perc and ozone after cleaning, if necessary.

Damage from a loss involving oil, such as a heating system fire, can leave behind a very pungent odor. Fortunately, this distinctive smell can be removed through dry cleaning processes with petroleum cleaning systems as well as perc.

In many older homes, lead contamination can be a problem. Sanding lead-based paint, for instance, spreads harmful dust and requires the same precautions as for mold. Should lead dust come into contact with skin, irritation can be reduced by cleaning with trisodium phosphate (TSP) or a high-phosphate dishwasher detergent.

On many losses, whether fire or water, old-fashioned hand washing is the prescribed method for delicate items. These typically include wedding dresses and sequined gowns, along with shoes, belts, purses, and hats. With such items, surface coatings are prevalent, and some designs, patterns or colors are merely painted on or glued to a fabric's surface. Adhesives can dissolve in dry cleaning solvent, and anything beyond the gentlest of hand washing can ruin the garment. Similarly, sequins may lose their coating or change color, and beads (particularly plastic) and buttons made of polystyrene can dissolve in the drycleaning process,

or dye might transfer to surrounding fabric.

A professional textile restorer clearly will be focused on customer satisfaction and prepared to handle any potential disputes that might arise about the thoroughness of the restoration process. An excellent resource available to textile restoration companies is the Drycleaning & Laundry Institute (DLI), a leading membership organization for those in the textile care industry. DLI's dispute resolution program involves independent testing of textile restoration success through a dedicated and highly advanced laboratory. Testing methods include microscopic and ultraviolet examinations, chemical indicators, and spotting chemicals. DLI's analysis creates an objective report to settle any differences of opinion.

### Meticulously Document

A final component of professional textile restoration is the creation of an audit trail for every loss. A work authorization and on-site inventory signed by insured are imperative for verifying what is removed from site and preventing scope creep. A comparison of the on-site inventory with the printed final invoice ensures an exact match of unit counts, protecting the insurer from overpaying. Similarly, a non-salvageable inventory details items where restoration could not be attempted because of excessive damage such as scorching, and a non-restorable list notes those items that did not respond to the textile restoration process. Special paperwork for high-value items such as leathers and furs provides an additional layer of verification and protection for all involved with the loss.

Overall, today's textile restoration mirrors the accessibility, documentation, and procedures of other contents specialists while implementing specific, time-tested approaches for each individual loss situation. The result is a proven system that benefits adjusters as well as their insureds.

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