

## Facilitator — August/September 2015



### Create a Game Plan

*Bill Batten*

Don't get caught unprepared when your grease interceptor fails

On Super Bowl weekend three years ago, a national Japanese fusion restaurant chain in San Diego had a problem: Its steel grease interceptor had failed, leaking grease into a health club downstairs.

With a big weekend ahead, the chain's owner needed a replacement, and fast. Without a functioning grease trap, the popular restaurant risked missing out on Super Bowl weekend business.

#### An All-Too-Common Problem

The dilemma faced by this restaurant isn't uncommon. Restaurants often discover their grease interceptors have failed at what seems like the worse time and, sometimes, in the worst possible way.

Many times, owners discover the problem because of a leak they discover in their facility, or a complaint about leaking wastewater and grease from a neighbor.

Just last year, a restaurant near North Carolina discovered its grease interceptor was failing only after a neighbor, a theater company, found wastewater in its basement. This also happened on a weekend.

Emergency grease interceptor replacements are tough. You have to locate a suitable unit, find a plumber who can replace it and obtain the necessary clearances from your local wastewater regulator. And if the facility is shut down due to a malfunctioning unit, every hour that goes by until you get the replacement installed means you are losing money.

You also can lose more money in the long run if you don't consider the total cost of ownership for a grease interceptor. If you are using a traditional concrete or steel grease interceptor, failure isn't a matter of if; it's a matter of when.

#### Planning Ahead

Now is a good time to figure out your replacement plan. Here are six factors to consider.

**1 Location and space constraints.** Traditionally, concrete grease interceptors were installed in the ground outside the restaurant, often with an access port in the parking lot. But most commercial kitchens today do not have that kind of space anymore.

A variety of new designs allow facilities to install point-source units in their commercial kitchen or larger units in a basement, an unused back corner or even between floors. No matter how tight your space constraints are, there is a grease interceptor that will work for you.

Keep in mind: In-ground or in-floor units, and their replacements, will cost more; inside units will likely mean that flooring and concrete must be ripped up, concrete re-poured and flooring reinstalled; outside, ripping up an inground unit could require blocking off a drive-through lane or parking area while concrete is ripped up and removed.

**2 Code compliance.** If you haven't installed a new grease interceptor in the last few years, you may be surprised by tighter local ordinances. As federal clean water standards get tougher and wastewater infrastructure grows, many municipalities are tightening their regulations. Some communities even incentivize owners to adopt more efficient grease separators for pollution control.

San Francisco, for example, offers restaurants a discount on their sewer bills if they install automated grease interceptors, which come with mechanical or electronic timers to ensure the units run regularly.

**3 Capacity needs.** The most obvious consideration is how much grease interceptor capacity your facility needs. Variations in menus (think restaurant versus coffee house) can make a big difference in the quantities of FOGs a commercial kitchen produces. So understanding your needs is critical. Fortunately, there are online resources to help you and your plumber calculate your capacity requirements.

With the emergence of hydromechanical grease interceptors, restaurants and institutional food-service facilities have the option of installing interceptors that are much more space efficient. These new models can store larger volumes of grease in compact footprints. So a need for a high-capacity unit doesn't mean you need to rip up your parking lot and install a large tank.

**4 Ease of maintenance.** Facility managers should consider how easy it will be to service a potential replacement grease trap. All grease interceptors must be periodically emptied, but frequency is determined by the unit's volume and, more importantly, its efficiency. Traditional concrete traps hold large volumes, usually 1,000 or more gallons of liquid. However, they can only accumulate about 25 percent of that volume as retained grease before they start to lose efficiency and begin letting FOGs escape into the wastewater system, leaving the facility owner open to fines.

Some restaurants may have employees empty their grease interceptors; others hire contractors to service the traps with pump trucks. Both are viable options, and each involves different costs and management requirements. Having employees empty the trap—assuming it doesn't require special pumping equipment—may be cost efficient, but emptying the grease trap is likely to be an unpopular task with the kitchen staff, so managers must monitor it carefully to ensure it gets done.

Hiring an outside contractor ensures the task will get done regularly, but sometimes, the location of the grease interceptor can turn the periodic pumping out of the grease trap into a disruptive task. No one wants a pump truck blocking a drive-through lane or taking up valuable parking spaces, if they can avoid it.

**5 Availability of parts.** Modern grease interceptors have a number of parts—mechanical and sometimes electronic. If something goes wrong and a part must be replaced, consider how hard it will be to track down the required part. Can your manufacturer overnight you or your plumber spare parts in an emergency? The faster you get your parts, the faster your interceptor (and your commercial kitchen) can be back up and running.

**6 Durability.** Even more important is ensuring your grease interceptor is durable. Traditional designs that use concrete or steel may be mechanically simple, but the biochemical environment inside a grease interceptor produces acid that eats away at the trap (hence the leaks at both the restaurants mentioned earlier). In the last quarter century, there's been an enormous amount of innovation in grease interceptor design, and there are many models on the market that are well engineered and constructed of more durable materials. They will almost certainly last longer than a traditional grease interceptor.

Replacing a grease interceptor is not as simple as "get another one of those." In many cases, facility managers don't want to duplicate a unit that's already failed on them. They want something that will do the job better and more efficiently for years to come.

No one can guarantee you won't be stuck replacing a grease interceptor on a busy Super Bowl weekend, but if you do some planning ahead, you can ensure that when it comes time to get a new interceptor, you won't be making a last second Hail Mary pass.

Bill Batten is the CEO and Owner of Thermaco Inc., the manufacturer of Big Dipper and Trapzilla Grease Interceptors. He has more than 30 years experience in the field of fats, oil and grease separation and is the author or co-author of 50 patents in wastewater pretreatment.