R-22 Refrigerant: Here Today, Here After 2020

Refrigerant will still be available, usable and legal after manufacturing, importation halts.

BY JAY KESTENBAUM

Image courtesy of ASPEN Refrigerants.

The phase out of R-22 is not a new story. In 2010, the EPA began a phasedown of all hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), of which R-22 was the most common and first big target.

What’s new about the phase out is that misinformation is clouding the true timeline and facts of R-22’s longevity to the market, confusing contractors and system owners alike. Recently, some companies have been blatantly proclaiming that R-22 will be unavailable, banned or even illegal beginning in 2020. It’s on websites; it’s repeated through social media; and it’s spoken by members of our industry. At best, this information is incorrect. At worst, it’s a lie.

The truth about R-22

R-22 is still available, still usable and still legal—but will be no longer manufactured or imported starting in 2020. Beginning Jan. 1, 2020, no new R-22 will be allowed to be imported into the U.S. or manufactured onshore. However, R-22 is today—and is for the future—still 100% legal to use. Virgin R-22 and reclaimed R-22 refrigerants purified back to AHRI-700 specifications are perfectly legal to use, and, by industry estimates, will be readily available to service existing R-22 equipment.

Reclaimed R-22, from legitimate sources, is certified to AHRI 700 standards, which is exactly the same purity as newly manufactured R-22. EPA-tallied reports from U.S.-certified reclaimers show that more than 9 million lb of R-22 are reclaimed each year. Robust R-22 reclaim, combined with existing industry inventory, plus final R-22 production, will be more than enough supply for the HVAC industry. When existing systems reach their end of life, the R-22 in those systems can be recovered and reclaimed and put back into the market again and again.

Technicians at an Atlanta facility test recovered refrigerants for purity using a mass spectrometer. The refrigerant is then evacuated, processed to AHRI 700 purity and put back into the market.

R-22 systems designed for R-22

R-22 has been one of the most successful refrigerants of all time because it works very well. Systems designed for R-22 are not compatible with 410A, which operates at a much higher pressure. An R-22 system really can’t be retrofit to use 410A. While there are other alternative refrigerants
available, keep in mind that systems which were engineered for R-22 were designed to take advantage of its chemical properties, not the properties of new refrigerants. Retrofitting a system and changing out the refrigerant simply may not be worth the cost when R-22 is readily available and clearly the best choice.

**New R-22 production ends; reclaim continues**
Beginning in 2020, the remaining stocks and continually recovered and reclaimed R-22 must suffice to supply the market. Reclaimed R-22 will continue to supply the market for decades to come, just as we still see some chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) gases available today to service older equipment.

**Recovery, reclamation responsibility, benefit**
Recovering R-22 is good business practice, and is also the law. R-22 is worth money when recovered correctly and not mixed with other gases, as it can be sold to reclaimers. On the other side of the equation, by law, R-22 cannot be vented. Recently, the EPA and law enforcement have stepped up prosecution of those caught venting. In 2016, an Ohio off-duty HVAC technician was sentenced to 54 months in jail for venting R-22.

**R-22 phase out questions**
Can R-22 be used in 2020 and beyond? Yes. From 2014 to 2020, the EPA is employing a phase out approach of allowing manufacturers a quota of new refrigerant that each company can supply each year. This quota drops each year, with 2020 reducing the allocation of new R-22 to zero. In 2020 and after, R-22 can still be used, bought, sold, recovered and reclaimed. It will all be legal. We just won’t have new virgin R-22 coming on the market.

**Why is this misinformation propagating?** Some of this is likely confusion. The production phase out is mistaken for a ban. The word ‘ban’ gives the impression that R-22 is illegal. But it’s not. There may be a darker reason that companies spread this myth: pushing the sale of a new system or retrofit. By convincing consumers that R-22 will be illegal or priced astronomically high, some contractors may be resorting to scare tactics to drive consumers and businesses into buying new systems or retrofitting and switching out refrigerant. They’ll make more money on the service call. It’s a short-term gain for the contractor, but a black eye for the industry. Don’t be fooled.

**What is the consequence of this myth?** Every time a contractor repeats a false claim about the legality of R-22, it harms businesses that have the right knowledge and use it responsibly. One company may present a fix for a system, while another is adamant that it must be replaced. Misinformation erodes trust, and that can jeopardize business. In short, we can all suffer because of the actions of a few.

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**What can you do about it?** Know what’s true and spread that knowledge among your organization. Keep up-to-date with resources such as RSES, ACCA, AHRI, HARDI and the EPA.

Educate your customers. Update your website with the correct information. Offer branded materials with up-to-date information, guiding system owners in their decision making process. This places you in a leadership position, sharing the industry’s knowledge and news. It’s a great way to build the confidence of your customers.

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