Maharam’s Reduced Environmental Impact: Eliminating PFAS

Maharam is committed to reducing its environmental impact through rigorous standards for product development and company practices. Supported by twenty years of ISO-14001 certification, these efforts include reduction of carbon emissions, plastic, and chemicals. At the forefront of Maharam’s approach is the proactive elimination of harmful and unnecessary chemicals typically applied to textiles.

Recognizing the data and legislation that suggest certain chemicals often used in textiles carry serious risks for the environment and human health, Maharam has eliminated antimicrobials, phthalates, and flame retardants from its textile finishes and enlisted research-supported alternatives.

Over the past decade, Maharam has partnered on several research initiatives to evaluate the presumed efficacy and performance benefits of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), a class of roughly 18,000 chemicals used in industrial and consumer products, including on textiles as stain-repellent treatments. Common PFAS (such as PFOA and PFOS) have been widely studied and proven to pose a variety of risks to the reproductive, developmental, and immune health of humans and other organisms. PFAS also break down slowly and can build up in people, animals, and the environment over time.

In 2017, Maharam joined Govmark, a testing lab, and Herman Miller to test the stain repellency of textiles with PFAS finishes in a lab setting. The study concluded that textiles without finishes offered comparable cleanability to those with PFAS finishes. That same year, Maharam partnered with Harvard University’s Office of Sustainability to evaluate the stain repellence of textiles without finishes in the field. Results from the study revealed no qualitative decline in performance in the absence of finishes.

Together the studies confirm that finishes with PFAS confer little stain-repellence benefit, especially in applications with moderate, high, or extreme traffic. According to Betsy Phillips, Maharam’s director of environmental initiatives: “We were curious to find out if the performance rationale for PFAS is compelling enough to outweigh the harmful effects. Both studies provided clarity that the impact to human health far outweighs any initial benefit.”

A 2020 lab-based study conducted by the Green Science Policy Institute with Maharam textiles independently corroborated the results of the two previous studies. Aiming to raise public awareness of the limitations of PFAS performance attributes, the study undertook comparative analysis of upholsteries with and without traditional finishes and with PFAS-free alternative finishes. As previously concluded, finishes with PFAS afforded negligible stain repellence benefits; factors such as fiber composition and weave structure were larger contributors to a textile’s performance.

Conclusions from ongoing internal and third-party research have informed the design and environmental impact of Maharam’s product offering for nearly a decade. Since introducing its first two performance-focused textiles without finishes in 2017, Maharam has proactively eliminated PFAS from 75% of its current offering and, as of January 2023, all forthcoming products are PFAS-free.

About Maharam
Founded in 1902 in New York, Maharam is a leading creator of textiles for commercial and residential interiors. Recognized for its rigorous and holistic commitment to design, Maharam embraces a range of disciplines from product, graphic, and digital design to art and architecture. Maharam textiles are included in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Stedelijk Museum, among others. Maharam is the recipient of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum Design Patron Award for its longstanding support of art and design.
