

Real Estate eNews

Imported Drywall Leaves Consumers High and Dry

While it may seem like a distant memory, the housing boom of the last decade created shortages in building materials during its peak, forcing some suppliers to turn to Chinese products to fill in the gaps. Now, drywall imported from China and used in the construction of new homes in at least 14 states across the country, has been linked to health and structural problems by hundreds of homeowners.



To date, the Consumer Protection Safety Commission (CPSC) has reported receiving approximately 200 complaints from homeowners who believe they are experiencing health symptoms from the use of the imported drywall. Louisiana's state health department has received complaints from double that number. Health concerns include irritated and itchy eyes and skin, difficulty in breathing, persistent cough, bloody noses, runny noses, recurrent headaches, sinus infection and asthma attacks.

Consumers raising concerns about drywall have typically identified a "rotten egg" smell within their house. The smell is said to grow worse under conditions of heat and humidity. Residents also report blackened and corroded metal components in their homes, frequent failure and need for replacement of central air conditioning evaporator coils, and intermittent operation or failure of appliances, such as refrigerators and dishwashers, and electronic devices such as televisions and video game systems.



The majority of complaints have come from residents of Florida. Other reports have been received from consumers in Louisiana, Virginia, Wisconsin, Ohio, Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, California, Washington, Wyoming, the District of Columbia, Arizona, and Tennessee. The homes affected were constructed primarily in 2006 to 2007, when an increase in new construction occurred, in part, due to the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005.

A possible contaminant of the drywall is thought to be connected to fumigants sprayed on the drywall and material inside it. Some Chinese-manufactured drywall is also made with the coal byproduct fly ash that is less refined than the form used by U.S. drywall makers.

According to reports from the Associated Press, importation of potentially tainted Chinese building materials may have exceeded 500 million pounds during one four-year period. The drywall may have been used in the construction of more than 100,000 homes.



The CPSC, in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), is currently conducting investigations on both health and safety fronts.

The agency is investigating health complaints by conducting in-home air sampling studies to monitor levels of sulfur, acid and other gases, as well as laboratory chamber studies to separate and identify chemical emissions from the drywall. The CPSC also is conducting investigations into electrical and fire safety issues, with emphasis placed on corrosion of electrical components including residential wiring, receptacles, switches, circuit breakers, panel boards, ground-fault circuit interrupters and arc-fault circuit interrupters.



The CPSC suggests that concerned homeowners watch for the following signs which could indicate trouble: blackened or corroded wiring; power outages; dim or flickering lights; arcs; sizzles or buzzes from electrical system devices; odors or pungent smells. Multiple symptoms are a stronger indication of problems.

If problems related to imported drywall are suspected, the CPSC recommends physical symptoms be immediately addressed with a physician. Electrical or fire safety concerns should be communicated to the local gas or electric supplier, and a licensed electrician or building inspector.

Homeowners should also contact state and local authorities, and file a report with the Consumer Protection Safety Commission at cpsc.gov.