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Chinese drywall fears widen in SW Florida

BY DICK HOGAN • DHOGAN@NEWS-PRESS.COM • DECEMBER 21, 2008

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Richard Cesta's on his third air conditioning coil in a few months at his Bella Terra condominium. The air in his home sometimes smells of sulfur.

Like other Lee County residents, he's worried he may be victim of Chinese drywall leaking corrosive chemicals into his home and endangering his health.

"You can actually see all the copper tubing that deals with the air conditioning system has turned black," said Cesta, 61, a retired truck driver from Long Island, N.Y., who bought the condo in south Lee County in 2006 and retired there with his wife, Virginia, last summer.




Karen Kuenz experienced coughing and other ailments from a smell that came from the closet of a spare bedroom of her south Lee County home. When the room was repaired, nothing tested could be pinpointed as a culprit. The results and physical symptoms raised suspicion the problem was Chinese drywall. (Stephen Hayford/news-press.com)

Cesta said he contacted the builder, Lennar Homes, which sent out an air quality inspector but stopped answering Cesta's questions after the inspector said "there were no human health effects."

Lennar officials were unavailable for comment Friday and Saturday.

Aubuchon Homes has moved one family from its home in Fort Myers while the builder determines whether it's drywall-related, and Engle Homes has encountered the problem twice and fixed it by taking out the drywall or sealing it with paint.

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Doug Hoffman, executive director of the National Organization of Remediators and Mold Inspectors, said he's been getting reports of problems associated with Chinese drywall mainly in the Southeast.

Dan Reid of Intuitive Environmental Solutions in Fort Myers, said he's started to encounter the Chinese drywall issue in the past three months.

"I've been in some homes, I've heard a lot of complaints, I've heard of a lot of coils failing, I've done a lot of research," Reid said.

His conclusion: At least some drywall imported from China during the homebuilding boom years of 2004 and 2005 was made with waste materials from scrubbers on coal-fired power plants.

Those materials leak into the air as gases and combine with the moisture on an air conditioning coil to create sulfuric acid, which appears to be dissolving solder joints and copper tubing — creating leaks, blackening the coils and even causing the system to fail, Reid said.

"It appears that every case will need to be evaluated individually," he said.

Cesta said he's worried about the health implications of continuing to breathe the sulfur compounds in

OTHER SCARES

The Chinese drywall controversy isn't the first building material scare to hit Lee County:

BAD POLYBUTYLENE: Polybutylene pipe was installed in a million homes and as many as 6 million mobile homes and apartments in the late '70s, early '80s as an alternative to metal. But the pipes tended to deteriorate over time when exposed to chlorine and chemicals found in water. Numerous homes in fast-growing Lee County were affected by the issue, which was eventually settled by a class action lawsuit that set up a fund to pay for damages.

COPPER PIPE: Thin-walled copper pipe was used by some contractors in the mid-1980s. It tended to spring a leak, however, and is no longer used.

MOLD: Some homes in the community of Bristol Parc in Gateway had severe infestations of mold after what county officials said was sloppy construction work. Some residents fought it out with the builder, Pulte Homes, in the courts for years.

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the air if he stays in his home but others with similar situations have decided to live with it.

Karen Kuenz, 69, a retiree from St. Louis, has smelled sulfur for years in her house at The Legends, a Lennar subdivision in south Lee County.

A ditch dug by Lennar around the house and filled with rocks lessened the problem although "they found no water" but there's still one room where the "stinky sulfur is just nasty," she said.

Charles Jans, a former vice president of McGarvey Construction in Bonita Springs who started this month as a partner in commercial real estate agent Grubb Ellis / 1st Commercial, said the importing of drywall from China is a practice of the past.

"I think we're pretty much back to the local sources now because the demand's way off," he said — there's no need to buy more expensive foreign products.

Drywall isn't usually a problem, he said, because it's thoroughly sealed off.

"It goes on the wall and they tape it up and then they sand it really well and then they spray a primer on and a final coat of paint," he said. "All this acts as a sealer."

Regardless of who's at fault, lawsuits appear to be one likely result of the problem.

Fort Myers-based attorney Kevin Jursinski said he's representing one Bella Terra resident with Chinese drywall. "The way they found out about it was the air conditioner kept going out."

A builder is legally responsible to fix the problem, he said.

"It's a latent defect," he said. "It manifested itself late but as soon as it's discovered, the builder's responsible even if it's gone past the one-year warranty."

The builder in turn "can go back on his supplier, on up the chain. Each one of those people up the chain is responsible," back to the actual manufacturer, Jursinski said.


Charles Phoenix, a Fort Myers-based attorney, said residents likely will be filing two kinds of lawsuits: claims to repair the defective drywall and personal injury claims in the event someone's health is damaged.

The issue is even the subject of dark humor.

"In Bella Terra, there was a guy actually dressed up as Chinese drywall at Halloween," Jursinski said. "The terror of the neighborhood."

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mm2006 wrote:

Its not about being sue happy....what about the long term affects of living in these homes and breathing in the air? If its aging metals...what is it doing to the delicate lining of our lungs? Lennar should fix the homes...that is their obligation but they also have to be responsible for using a defective toxic product and if these people have health problems down the road....someone has to be liable.

12/22/2008 4:56:36 PM

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Nowhorrorshow wrote:

Replying to shameful01:

They've had A/C issues and also have on going respiratory issues and I want to know who is going to be help accountable!! No doubt this will put Lennar out of business however where is our government--do we not have agencies to regulate the safety of all products that come into this United States of America. Yes they will be seeking legal counsel ASAP and I will be contacting our elected officials to get them involved----what is this world coming to??? I guess it's all about the money and how cheaply products can be made and the almighty bottom line-----what about the safety of the people in this United States of America-----who is going to stand up for the people---well I'm going to find out who that person could

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be!!!!

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12/22/2008 10:04:38 AM

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Misty105 wrote:

Replying to shameful01:

Replying to Misty105:

What are the brand names of the A/C systems being affected? I've seen of one in particular that seems to be having severe problems.

I have no idea at this point.

If you can find out what the brand name is let me know, it should be on the outside unit. We have seen one brand with repetitive coil problems being blamed on Chinese drywall. Several other brand units that were installed during the same time frame have had no problems at all. It seems to me that the recycled copper being used to manufacturer the coils could also be the culprit.

12/22/2008 7:49:36 AM

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shameful01 wrote:

Replying to Misty105:

What are the brand names of the A/C systems being affected? I've seen of one in particular that seems to be having severe problems.

I have no idea at this point.

12/22/2008 7:09:58 AM

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Misty105 wrote:

What are the brand names of the A/C systems being affected? I've seen of one in particular that seems to be having severe problems.

12/22/2008 6:29:04 AM

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