

Uproar over Chinese drywall; Floridians say it's making them ill and hurting home values

Homeowners claim the drywall is causing health problems, including nosebleeds, headaches and sore throats.

By Paul Owers | South Florida Sun-sentinel

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Homeowners in Florida and other states are mounting a charge against defective Chinese drywall, saying it's making them sick and damaging their homes built during the housing boom.

As many as 36,000 homes in Florida and 100,000 nationwide may contain the imported wallboard, which can give off a sulfurous "rotten egg" odor, tarnish metals and ruin appliances and electronics by corroding pipes and wires.

Homeowners claim the drywall is causing health problems, including nosebleeds, headaches and sore throats.

Most complaints involve homes built from 2002 to 2006 during a building surge that caused a shortage of materials and resulted in builders using imports.

The Florida Department of Health has logged more than 100 complaints, including some from residents of Broward and Palm Beach counties. Lawsuits are sprouting in Florida, Alabama and Louisiana, and people in Mississippi, Virginia and California also have reported problems.

The health department has tested Chinese drywall and said last month that it did give off a sulfur smell when exposed to heat. An American-made drywall sample didn't.

But the agency said it needs to conduct further tests over the next several months to determine whether the Asian wallboard poses a health threat.

While many homeowners in Florida and beyond suspect their properties contain the bad drywall, they have yet to prove it. In some cases, water is to blame rather than the drywall, said Jack Snider, principal of a Fort Myers environmental consulting firm that has tested homes in Florida.

Still, the drywall uproar is resonating in Washington.

U.S. Sens. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Mary Landrieu, D-La., proposed legislation Monday, asking for a recall and an immediate ban on tainted building products from China."

This appears to be a fairly severe problem," said Chris Day, a spokesman for Nelson. "People's entire lives are in their homes."

Scott Semrau says his house in the Vizcaya community west of Delray Beach has the classic

symptoms of Chinese drywall -- a rotten-egg smell, a tarnished silver set and failing air conditioning coils that contain black residue. He's on his third microwave oven, and his wife, Deborah, is developing severe allergies.

Semrau said he complained to the builder, Centerline Homes, but the Coral Springs company isn't taking action. In a statement to the Sun Sentinel, the builder said it never knowingly allowed subcontractors to use deficient or defective drywall and that it has made unspecified repairs to "several" homes in another unnamed community.

"Centerline Homes will continue to become further educated on [Chinese drywall] so that it can appropriately and efficiently address the needs of its customers," according to the statement.

Semrau began noticing the problems within a year of moving into his new house in early 2002. Although officials think much of the drywall came into the country in 2004 or later, the state health department acknowledges that some of the drywall may have been used here before then.

Like other residents who think their homes have been compromised, Semrau, 59, is worried about the value of his property, which already has taken a hit during the housing bust.

"I don't like litigation, but I don't see a whole lot of options at this point," he said.

Miami-based builder Lennar Corp. has said about 80 of its homes in Florida have the problem drywall and the company is working to replace it. The builder filed suit against Knauf Plasterboard Tianjin, a Chinese maker of drywall and other building materials.

Lennar officials could not be reached for comment, despite phone calls and an e-mail. Some homeowner lawsuits allege that builders knew the drywall was defective, but the Florida Home Builders Association in Tallahassee says it has no evidence to suggest that any of its 14,000 members used the product while knowing it was inferior.

"Builders, as well as the homeowners, were all victims," said Edie Ousley, the trade group's spokeswoman. Knauf Plasterboard says it's unfairly taking the brunt of the criticism because it complied with Chinese law by marking its name on the plasterboard. More than 100 companies made Chinese drywall in 2006 alone, said Melisa Mendez Chantres, a spokeswoman for Knauf.

The company hired an independent consultant, whose tests show the wallboard is not a health risk, Chantres said.

Lawrence Riesz and Jennifer Schnee of Parkland filed a lawsuit March 10 in federal court against Knauf and WCI Communities Inc., their Bonita Springs home builder.

Parkland also is concerned about the use of Chinese drywall in the city. Mayor Michael Udine took a group of homeowners to Tallahassee on Tuesday to meet with state officials.

Riesz and Schnee, who paid \$1.5 million for their home in the Parkland Golf & Country Club in 2007, said in their suit that the house has a rotten-egg smell and that they've had to repair or replace air conditioning coils, televisions, a washing machine and refrigerator.

WCI, which filed for bankruptcy protection last year, has not returned repeated calls from the Sun Sentinel.

"Whole communities are going to be destroyed by the negative stigma associated with the use of Chinese drywall," said Stephen Astley, the couple's Boca Raton attorney.

Some residents may need only a few boards ripped out and replaced, while others could be forced to move out while the homes are torn down and rebuilt, said David Durkee, the Coral Gables attorney representing Semrau and other Florida homeowners.

At a recent town hall meeting organized by Durkee in Delray Beach, some residents wondered whether they should walk away from their homes.

"It's very frustrating because you really can't give them any good way out at this point," Durkee said.

Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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