

Drywall woes dog homeowners

Chinese import blamed for medical, electronic problems

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Four years ago, Susan Wilkens was newly divorced and looking for a fresh start, so she built an upscale custom garden home in Shelby County's Highland Lakes neighborhood. That's when the trouble began.

At first, it all seemed so minor: a faulty air conditioning coil, a broken-down refrigerator, sterling silver jewelry that tarnished within weeks of cleaning, and several lingering sinus infections. One had nothing to do with the other, or so she thought.

But over time, Wilkens' health problems accelerated. Things didn't taste or smell right anymore, and the headaches worsened. She underwent CAT scans



NEWS STAFF/BEVERLY TAYLOR

Susan Wilkens has had problems with tarnished silver and smoke detectors that go off randomly in her home, which contains drywall imported from China.

for a possible brain tumor and contemplated sinus surgery.

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Meanwhile, her appliances went awry. Since 2006, she has replaced her coffee maker four times, her toaster oven twice and has run through at least 100 batteries on TV remote controls that stop working almost once a month.

In some ways, it was a relief for Wilkens to finally learn that her home contains problematic drywall imported from China, a product that's been blamed for millions of dollars in damage in hard-hit areas like Florida and Louisiana.

But now, she feels trapped in her home and faces an uncertain future, as she waits for her lawsuit against the drywall manufacturer to proceed and for the U.S. government to provide cleanup standards for homeowners.

"It's been a complete nightmare," said Wilkens, 59, principal of St. Peter's Child Development Center. "I get up in the morning thinking about it, and I go to bed thinking about it. It's taken over our lives."

Building boom

Nationwide, it's difficult to get a clear handle on the extent of the Chinese drywall problem, amid scores of lawsuits filed by homeowners. But officially, there have been about 3,000 reports from residents in 37 states, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, which is investigating the issue.

From Alabama, there have been 150 reports, about 5 percent of the total. Some say the number could be higher, since many people have been reluctant to talk openly about their experience because of the likely impact on their property values.

Chinese drywall was imported in mass quantities during the mid-2000s, amid the U.S. housing boom and the rebuilding effort following Hurricane Katrina.

It is believed to be tainted with sulfuric compounds, which combine with moisture in the air to corrode all types of metal, including silver and copper piping and wiring.

So far, the CPSC probe has found a "strong association" between homes with the suspect drywall and the levels of hydrogen sulfide and corrosion of metals in those homes.

The CPSC also is investigating a possible link to health problems reported by homeowners. Other federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency, are involved in the effort.



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Fresh start stymied

For Wilkens, moving into her new home in the Dunnavant Place of Highland Lakes subdivision was part of a "cleansing" experience following the breakup of her marriage.

Downsizing from a larger home on a three-acre lot, she sold all of her old furniture and collaborated with her best friend, a decorator, to outfit the three bedroom, two-bath garden home, which is valued at about \$280,000.

"The first year was really good," she said.

After that, things changed.

When her brand-new air conditioner broke down and required a new coil, she thought it was odd. But the same thing had happened to some of her neighbors, so they assumed there was a problem with the heating and air conditioning system installation for the subdivision.

Other oddities started piling up. Kitchen appliances stopped working, smoke detectors went off randomly and TV remote controls devoured batteries at a rate of about four AAAs a month.

Wilkens also was frustrated with not being able to keep her sterling silver jewelry and serving pieces clean. Once, she returned a piece of jewelry she bought, believing it was defective.

At the same time, she wasn't feeling like herself. In 2007, she noticed an increasing sensitivity to smells and tastes that had never bothered her before: strong perfume made her ill, and she couldn't stand anything cooked on a charcoal grill.

She also came down with a string of severe sinus infections that left her wheezing and seeking help from several doctors. They prescribed antibiotics and ordered a series of scans that turned up nothing, although Wilkens feared at one point that she might have a brain tumor.

Last fall, as she was considering sinus surgery, she heard talk among her neighbors about Chinese drywall and did some research.

"I Googled Chinese drywall and went, 'Oh my gosh.' It started to make sense. But then I got really scared."

Drywalled in

Wilkens contacted Birmingham attorney Eric Hoaglund, who is representing about 50 metro area clients who have Chinese drywall in their homes.

He scheduled an inspection of her home, which determined that it has significant amounts of the suspect drywall.

The name of a manufacturer linked to the product, Knauf, is stamped on drywall in Wilkens' home. Corroded wires inside electrical outlets were another clue, as was a subtle sulfurous odor. In addition, lab testing on a square of drywall cut from the home shows that it emits higher-than-normal levels of sulfurous gas.

At this point, Wilkens said she has limited options, since she can't sell her house and can't afford to take on another mortgage. She also can't proceed with repairs, since ripping out drywall is costly and the CPSC has not released guidelines on how to do it properly.

Preliminary remediation instructions are expected to be issued by the end of April, a spokeswoman for the agency said.

Some say that fixing the problem might require gutting the house, because of concerns about contamination of insulation, wiring and other components.

Meanwhile, the Chinese drywall problem is not a covered peril for insurers, said Ragan Ingram, governmental relations manager for the Alabama Department of Insurance.

The state department has received few complaints about the lack of coverage, Ingram said. But the National Association of Insurance Commissioners has been discussing the issue, and some states may eventually push for insurers to provide coverage, he said.

Wilkens has filed a lawsuit

against Knauf, part of a group of similar claims filed on behalf of thousands of homeowners across the United States. A bellwether trial for such litigation, involving a single owner and Knauf, is scheduled to start Monday in New Orleans.

Builder's situation

Birmingham's Eddleman Homes LLC is the builder in Dunnavant Place. The company has been closely monitoring the Chinese drywall issue and provided help to homeowners, its lawyer, David Marsh, said.

"This issue is of paramount importance to the Eddleman companies and Bill Eddleman and Doug Eddleman," Marsh said. "As soon as they discovered that there was Chinese drywall in some of their houses, they conducted an investigation."

The company identified the homes that were at risk for the suspect drywall and notified homeowners, he said. Then the company had its insurance company engage an independent expert to inspect the at-risk houses, and the results were provided to homeowners.

The Eddlemans are in limbo, too, Marsh said, because there is no consensus on remediation methods.

Marsh declined to say how many houses in Dunnavant Place contain Chinese drywall or whether houses in other Eddleman communities are affected. He added that the Eddlemans have traced the source of the drywall and taken steps to ensure it is not being used in any new houses.

Wilkens and Hoaglund said a number of homes in Dunnavant Place contain the suspect drywall. One of Wilkens' neighbors, Sharon Peace, is planning to move out of the home she shares with her husband to an apartment to escape her mounting health problems.

Like Wilkens, the Peaces also considered their new home a fresh start, moving in a month after they were married in summer 2006. Also like Wilkens, an inspection revealed the couple's

home contains the suspect drywall, and they are experiencing similar uncertainty.

Sharon Peace, 48, said she has had far more health issues than her husband, Dan, who will stay in the house for now. She cites rashes, hives, nosebleeds and a staph infection in her nose among the problems.

"I feel like this house has taken years off my life."

How many homes?

Before the Peaces discovered Chinese drywall, they had a parade of inspectors come through the house, trying to pinpoint the source of a sulfurous odor. Their air conditioning unit also failed, and silver items turned black.

Bart Fletcher, executive officer of the Greater Birmingham Association of Home Builders, said he has received only one call about Chinese drywall. It was from a person who was concerned that it might be in a house he or she was renting in south Jefferson County.

The National Association of Home Builders is following the issue closely, he added.

Metro area homeowners involved in Chinese drywall litigation number in the hundreds, according to lawyers.

Hoaglund said the majority of his clients' cases involve Knauf, and more than half of his clients have homes that were built in spring and summer 2006. The rest range from the end of 2005 to early 2007.

In the Birmingham area, nearly 12,000 new homes were sold in 2006 and 2007 combined, according to data supplied by Tom Brander, who compiles a monthly report on the local real estate market.

Fresh air, humidity

For now, Wilkens is staying in her home and taking steps to ease the impact of living with the suspect drywall. She uses air purifiers and opens her windows whenever possible to let in fresh air.

Her 25-year-old son is liv-

DO YOU HAVE CHINESE DRYWALL?

Most reports to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission involve homes that were built in 2006 and 2007. Reported "home symptoms" and health issues include:

- ▶ A sulfurous odor. Some people report a strong, rotten-egg or struck-match smell, while others say it's more subtle.
- ▶ Corrosion or blackening of metal items and copper wires.
- ▶ Frequent failures of copper piping in air conditioning units.
- ▶ The names of manufacturers linked to the problem stamped on the back of drywall. Companies include Knauf, Tianjin and Venture Supply. It also might say "Made in China."
- ▶ Irritated and itchy eyes and skin, headaches, a persistent cough and difficulty breathing.

IF YOU DO, WHAT TO DO

There appear to be limited options at this point.

- ▶ Chinese drywall is not a covered peril for insurers, according to the Alabama Department of Insurance.
- ▶ The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission is still working on the guidelines for home repairs. They are expected to be issued in late April.
- ▶ The Federal Trade Commission warns homeowners to be on the alert for anyone trying to sell test kits, inspections and quick fixes for tainted drywall. There are no federally approved testing kits or remediation methods.

ing with her at the moment, and he developed nosebleeds and a staph infection in his nose. He used to spend a lot of time in the garage working on his truck, and the inspection revealed that Chinese drywall is all over the garage.

Now, Wilkens and her son do not park their cars in the garage or spend extended time there.

While Wilkens' health problems have improved somewhat, humidity is thought to exacerbate the effects of Chinese drywall, so she won't rule out moving at some point.

And she is most worried about the long-term effects of living there.

"If my son and I start getting sick again this spring or summer, I'm going to figure something out and lock it up," she said. "I can't afford for it to do any more damage than it's already doing."

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