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Chinese drywall issue pops up locally

South Florida Business Journal - by [Paul Brinkmann](#)

Reports of contaminated Chinese drywall have surfaced in Miami-Dade County, raising fears of problems in South Florida for insurers and builders.

Drywall suspicions were raised first in southwest Florida, where homeowners complained of sulfuric odors, sickness and corrosion in air conditioners.

On Jan. 21, Miami-based **Lennar Homes** said it has begun repairing a dozen homes on Florida's west coast affected by imported drywall. The company said it has identified about 80 homes there that appear to have been built with Chinese drywall between November 2005 and November 2006.

One of the first reports in the Miami area came from homeowner Steven Fuchs, who bought a home in Homestead's Keys Gate subdivision in 2007.

"You couldn't live in this house," he said. "This gets in your throat, in your nose. When this hits you, you can't live in there."

Homestead city manager Mike Shehadeh said he had not heard of any cases anywhere in his city. Neither had building officials nor the city's director of development services.

Shehadeh said he was "disturbed" by the idea, but wanted to be careful with his response until the facts were in.

"If there was material that was not approved by Dade County, I would be extremely disturbed," he said. "If these builders snuck something through because it's cheaper, and it has adverse affects, I guarantee that I would be talking to the county and our attorneys to make sure they live up to their responsibilities.

"If this is a proven situation, if there is a problem with this material, we would do everything we can to help homeowners," he added. "This is disturbing. I don't want to live in a house like this."

Truly Burton, the **Builders Association of South Florida's** government affairs director for Miami-Dade, said she was aware of problems on the state's west coast, but hadn't been contacted about any local cases.

She cautioned that, in these tough economic times, some buyers might use the drywall issue as an excuse to back out of a contract.

The Florida Department of Health is tracking 38 complaints about the drywall, mostly in Manatee, Lee and Sarasota counties. It has also received two reports in Stuart and one in Port St. Lucie, but none so far in Broward or Palm Beach counties.

State officials and developers have said homebuilders started using imported drywall during the construction boom, when materials were scarce following the 2005 hurricane season. One supplier is **Knauf Plasterboard Tianjin Co.**, of the international Knauf family of companies based in Germany.

The developer of Keys Gate – South Kendall Construction – was just beginning to assess the problem this week, company principal Patrick Gleber said. He said he alerted his insurance company, which told him they were not aware of the drywall problems.

"We did buy drywall from that company, through a local supply company," Gleber said.

He said his company struggled to find domestic building materials after hurricanes Katrina and Wilma hit South Florida in 2005.

Gleber said problems were reported in two areas of Keys Gate – Augusta Greens and Pine Isles – but he did not know how many homes had the problem drywall. He said he might tear out drywall in at least three homes.

"It's going to be savage," Gleber said. "You might have to do some rewiring, and we don't know if we have to move people."

Keys Gate had 810 starts and 425 move-ins in 2006, according to Metrostudy.

Banner Supply, one of the state's largest drywall distributors, is monitoring information and handling complaints, Miami-based GM Ed Matthews said.

In 2006, Knauf paid for a toxicologist study of its plasterboard by the Little Rock, Ark.-based **Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health**.



Mark Freerks

Steven Fuchs shows where drywall was removed from his home at Keys Gate in Homestead.

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According to the study, it was performed at an undisclosed location in “the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area,” and revealed the presence of iron disulfide in the Knauf Tianjin plasterboard.

The study said the plasterboard gave off “naturally occurring” levels of sulfur compounds, but not in amounts that should be considered a public health concern. Media reports in southwest Florida have recounted numerous health complaints in affected homes, including breathing problems.

In a letter with the report, Knauf said the sulfur could be a natural component of gypsum mined in China for drywall.

Attorneys are already lining up to handle possible claims, including Donna Berger of **Katzman Garfinkel** in Fort Lauderdale. She runs the firm’s **Community Advocacy Network** for condominium and homeowner associations.

“We’re telling our clients, ‘Hey, if you’ve had problems with odors or blackened air conditioning pipes, you may have a problem,’” Berger said.

Owners of homes finished in 2005 or 2006 should move quickly to determine if they have problem drywall, she said. “You’re going to want a judgment entered quickly because homebuilders are struggling in this market.”

Berger said many homeowners only discover the problem after the drywall gets wet or moist somehow – even from steam-cleaning the carpets. In Fuchs’ case, he said he remembers a rainstorm last year caused leakage around a window.

Berger said a class action case against drywall companies is a strong possibility, depending on how the facts play out. She said Katzman Garfinkel is lining up environmental companies to conduct tests.

The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** is not investigating the claims, and is leaving the matter to the state health officials at this point, said Dawn Harris-Young, spokeswoman for EPA Region 4 in Atlanta. She noted that one report of the drywall problem has emerged in Virginia Beach.

According to the federal **Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry**, some sulfuric gases can cause breathing difficulties and more serious problems, such as burning of the nose and throat from sulfur dioxide, and irritation or headaches from low levels of hydrogen sulfide.

The Florida Home Builders Association is trying to determine how widespread the problem may be, said David Hart, the group’s VP of government relations.

“Our builders certainly had no way of knowing there was something defective with this product,” he said. “I also think it may point to a need, from a federal level, to protect us from China products that might be defective.”

Contact us

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