



Tribune photograph by BRITT LAUGHLIN

Chemical engineer Raymond Delaney, left, and forensic architect Charles Goldsmith compare a large piece of fire-retardant plywood roof that has deteriorated under high temperatures with a smaller piece not exposed to high temperatures.

Faulty plywood in roofs must go, expert says

By FRANK RUIZ
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TAMPA — Faulty fire-retardant plywood in roofs in thousands of townhouses in Florida and around the nation will have to be replaced, a Clearwater forensic architect said Friday.

Certain fire-retardant plywood used to comply with building codes collapses after exposure to high heat and moisture. In Florida and the Tampa Bay area, the material is widely used in construction of townhouses, said Charles Goldsmith, president of C. B. Goldsmith and Associates in Clearwater.

"We don't want to alarm the world, but it is a problem," said Goldsmith, who studies why building materials collapse.

Goldsmith is a consultant to the National Association of Home Builders and to the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division, which has launched two studies to help set standards for the use of the plywood in construction.

"We've seen it everywhere people have asked us to go out," Goldsmith said. "We know it exists. We don't know how widespread it is because the phenomenon has only recently been discovered."

Goldsmith said the building industry is in for massive litigation over use of the material because no one wants to be responsible for replacement.

Experts around the country agree that the faulty plywood will have to be replaced to avoid sagging roofs and cave-ins.

The problem is potentially catastrophic, said Susan LeVan, a scientist with the U. S. Agriculture Department, who is leading the studies.

Weakened roofs could cave in or someone walk-

ing on the roof could step through weak spots, she said.

"It's a slow process," she said. "The roof might sag, or it might crumble beneath them."

Companies that make the fire-retardant plywood have been hit with complaints and lawsuits.

Hoover Treated Wood Products in Thomson, Ga., one of three major manufacturers, has received a barrage of complaints and is involved in several lawsuits related to fire-retardant plywood that it sells, company officials said. They declined to elaborate.

All of the lawsuits presently against the company are related to the fire-retardant plywood products, said Glen Wilson, technical services manager.

The company does not plan to stop selling the product, but has developed a new fire-retardant chemical.

Other manufacturers, such as Koppers Co. Inc. in Pittsburgh, find themselves on the defensive. Koppers said its products have not been cited as faulty by the experts, but they are being lumped into the same group by the public.

Koppers, which has about 40 percent of the U. S. market for fire-retardant wood, sells a fire-retardant called Dricon that has "never had one single failure," said product manager Jim Black. It is participating with industry efforts to set up standards to control the material.

Scientists agree that so far only certain combinations of chemicals are at fault, but tests have not yet been completed.

Plywood must be replaced, expert says

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Experts said certain chemicals react with temperatures above 150 degrees Fahrenheit and moisture to cause the wood to break down after as little as four years. The American Plywood Association in Tacoma, Wash., no longer supports the use of fire-retardant chemicals in the treatment of plywood used in home construction.

But there is no concerted effort to stop using the plywood in roof construction, LeVan, the USDA scientist said.

"Until we have more conclusive data, it's doubtful (sale of) it will stop," she said. "But companies that produce the wood are being very cautious about its use."

No one knows what will be done or who will pay for replacement of

faulty wood.

Chemical companies such as Hoover blame poor installation and improper handling by builders. Builders say they are afraid they will be blamed.

The home-builders association, meeting in Atlanta, plans to make a statement on the issue Sunday.

Meanwhile, Goldsmith and other experts said people who suspect problems should consult builders or other experts.

LeVan said people should push builders or chemical companies to replace faulty roof panels to avoid future problems.

The fire-retardant panels are not easy to identify. Most are green, but so are some that are treated for termites, Goldsmith said. Also, a fire-retardant stamp on the panels is not always easy to find.

The materials have been used in construction for about 10 years.

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