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Chinese Drywall Cited in Building Woes

By MICHAEL CORKERY

Some home builders already struggling in Florida's dismal housing market are facing another headache: The Chinese-made drywall they used is causing unpleasant odors and possibly leading to electric problems in dozens of homes constructed during the housing boom.



Getty Images

Homes under construction last year in Miami. In some developments in south Florida, odors from Chinese-made drywall are drawing complaints and health concerns from homeowners.

A handful of builders and environmental consultants are investigating whether the drywall, a wide flat board used to create interior walls, is emitting sulfur-based gases that may be corroding air-conditioner coils, computer wiring and metal picture frames.

Some homeowners are concerned about possible respiratory problems, but the Florida Department of Health says tests show that the levels of emissions from the drywall pose no "immediate health threat." The affected homeowners also worry that the drywall problems will reduce their already decimated property values and hamper their ability to resell, even when the market recovers.

"My biggest fear is we'll be stuck with a house we can't sell," said Marty Smith, whose air conditioner in his home near Tampa has had repeated problems. His builder, [Lennar Corp.](#), recently tested

the air and drywall in his house and expects the results in a few weeks. Lennar's previous tests in other developments have found no health threats.

Although officials are still investigating the drywall from China, the complaints about drywall follow a rash of safety problems with other Chinese exports, ranging from toys to pet food.

Lennar, the nation's second-largest builder by volume, has tested air quality in at least 50 houses and has relocated several homeowners in order to rip out and replace the drywall, a costly process. It is trying to find less-intrusive ways to fix the problem. Lennar is continuing tests in a dozen of its Florida developments and has shared results with the state health department.

"Our first concern is our homeowners," said Darin McMurray, the builder's southwest Florida division president. "Lennar will continue to stand by our homes and work closely with homeowners to resolve their concerns."

Typically, builders use domestically produced drywall, which is made mainly from the mineral gypsum. But in 2006 -- amid the housing boom and the scramble for construction material along the Gulf Coast for reconstruction

after Hurricane Katrina -- suppliers began importing drywall from China.

Much of the problematic drywall, which is also known as wallboard or plasterboard, was manufactured in China. One manufacturer that is dealing with the fallout is Knauf Plasterboard, Tianjin Co., a subsidiary of the German construction-material company Knauf International GmbH.

In a statement, Knauf Tianjin said it hired experts in 2006 to investigate complaints about an odor and found "no health concerns related to the odor or any emissions in the residences."

The drywall problems, which appear to be confined to south Florida, are sparking dozens of homeowner complaints at a time when home builders can little afford the expense and negative publicity.

"The building industry is in a situation where it doesn't need one more issue of negativity out there," said Gary Aubuchon, president of Aubuchon Homes, a small Cape Coral, Fla., builder that recently relocated one homeowner while the company tests his house's air and drywall, some of which was made in China.

Knauf Tianjin said the drywall is made of naturally mined gypsum. After investigating drywall odors, the company said it switched mines and installed a monitoring device to detect gases.

In some Florida developments, the drywall issue emerged after months of failures in heating and cooling systems.

Mr. Smith said his air-conditioning unit has had multiple problems since he moved into his Lennar townhouse in March 2007. He said repair workers were perplexed by the frequency of the units' failures.

Tests done at other developments by Environ, an environmental consulting firm hired by Lennar, found that in some cases they drywall was emitting sulfur-based gases, which can be corrosive to electrical equipment, such as copper air-conditioning coils.

Florida health officials say they still are investigating whether the Chinese drywall is causing the odors and other problems.

"We have to nail down whether it's a causal or coincidental association," said David Krause, a toxicologist in the Florida Health Department.

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