

Company Fights Mold For Builders And Homeowners

*By Randy Luvaas
Managing Editor*

Mold has been around as long as the planet, but it's only in recent years that the tiny microbes have blossomed into a major problem for the construction industry.

Builders around the country have been hit with lawsuits filed by homeowners whose houses developed serious mold problems, which can create a variety of health issues for residents. Things got so bad a few years ago that contractors saw their liability insurance rates go through the roof — sometimes rising 600 percent or more — and many couldn't even find insurers to cover them against mold complaints.

Dr. Lillian Bartha of Indoor Health and Diagnostics in Olympia, stresses that researchers are only beginning to learn the affects living and working in a damp building can have.

"We always hear about the toxic mold — stachybotrys — but the scientific community is learning that even more common molds such as aspergillus and penicillium can cause problems."

Stachybotrys, the toxic mold that causes hysteria, needs paper or cellulose to grow. Others thrive on plant material and are common

outdoors or in garbage, but our systems aren't used to them in high concentrations, Bartha said.

The issue grabbed headlines in 2001 when a jury awarded a Texas couple \$32 million because of mold damage to their 22-room mansion. Farmers Insurance Co. was required to pay the award, along with \$1.4 million in remediation costs before the jury verdict.

All that has spawned a new industry, with companies devoted to combating construction-related mold troubles. One such firm is Mold Solutions NW, a North Bend business that is starting to reach out to the Yakima Valley.

The two-year-old company has hired Nadine Greathouse of Naches as its first marketing representative in this part of the state. It also has an office in Cle Elum, where all the new building activity has created a good customer base.

In her first few weeks selling the mold-prevention system on the state's dry side, Greathouse said she is running into one problem: People around here don't seem to consider mold a problem.

"A lot of them don't think there's mold because it's dry here," she said. "They think it's only a problem on the West side. But that's a huge misconception."

True, mold thrives with moisture. But it can arrive at a construction job on materials shipped in from elsewhere — lumber, insulation, carpeting, you name it. And once mold is established, it keeps growing.

Greathouse tells of one local businesswoman who shared her own mold experience.

“She thought she had bad allergies so she was living off Sudafed and Benadryl (allergy medications). She had a 5-month-old baby and the baby got really ill. She found out the baby had an infection in the lungs from mold, and the baby spent two weeks in the hospital on intravenous antibiotics,” she said.

“I saw one local company using a disclaimer on their insulation, a mold statement. It said there could be mold in the insulation and they are not responsible for it. And I saw (a local store) selling sheetrock with a six-month mold-preventative warranty.”

Mold Solutions NW takes its protection a step farther, she said.

“We have a 25-year warranty on new construction and a 10-year warranty on existing construction. The warrant says that if you have mold in your house and we kill the mold, it’s guaranteed for 10 years. It’s guaranteed for 25 years if we do the treatment on new construction.”

The warranty covers legal costs in case of a mold-related lawsuit, she said.

Mold As An Import

Most of the mold problems in this climate come from lumber, Greathouse noted.

“Most of the wood used in construction already has mold in it, because most builders don’t use kiln-dried wood. That’s too expensive. The raw wood mostly comes in from Seattle or Portland where it can sit out in the lumber-

yard or be exposed in storage buildings. It gets exposed to mold because of the (wet) elements.”

Once a building is infested with mold, the tiny spores can cause all kinds of health problems — asthma, allergic reactions, nasal congestion, coughing, throat and respiratory problems, skin rashes and irritations. For some people, the reaction can be severe, even life-threatening.

Mold Solutions uses a treatment solution that is so safe it is registered with the Environmental Protection Agency and is a part of the Built Green environment-friendly construction program offered through Central Washington Home Builders Association and others across the country, Great-house said.

“It’s completely nontoxic. You don’t even smell it like you do oil-based paints and stains. It’s so safe that if somebody accidentally drank it, it wouldn’t harm them. The man who created it actually drinks it in front of people as a demonstration.”

And it is more effective than the old-school anti-mold treatment, she said.

“The old mentality was you used a 50-50 bleach and water solution. That looks like it’s killing the mold but it just retards it. It actually grows back even stronger, like some germs grow back worse after they get immune to antibiotics.”

She is visiting builders, real-estate firms, lumber dealers, home inspectors and financial institutions selling the idea of mold pre-

vention. Some areas have been more receptive than others.

“Wenatchee has been very receptive. In Moses Lake they pretty much laugh in your face, in the Tri-Cities it’s kind of a mixed reaction and it’s about 50-50 in Yakima. Half the people think we do have a mold problem and half say we don’t.”