OSHA clarifies stance on asbestos

For nearly three years, NRCA has encouraged its members to submit air monitoring results from construction projects involving asbestos-containing roofing materials. The results of more than 500 samples have been submitted to NRCA, which show asbestos-fiber release well below levels generally accepted by government agencies.

NRCA is not aware of any evidence linking asbestos-related diseases to exposures from handling asbestos-containing roofing materials. Personal protective equipment designed for asbestos-abatement workers may only increase the overall health and safety risks to roofing workers, who may suffer heat exhaustion, be exposed to increased fall hazards and experience restricted vision. Moreover, approaching removal or repair of asbestos-containing roofing materials in the same manner as an interior, friable asbestos abatement project substantially increases the cost of a roofing project to a building owner without necessarily any corresponding benefit.

For these reasons, it is NRCA's position that asbestos roof removal should not be subjected to the same regulations as interior, friable asbestos abatement work, and that asbestos roof removal is best performed by qualified contractors skilled and experienced in good roof-removal practices.

A meeting between NRCA and OSHA officials has resulted in a clearer understanding of OSHA's position on its asbestos regulations and exemptions.

In response to an NRCA request, OSHA stated that its denial of an industrywide exemption from air monitoring requirements was based not on any concern over the data provided by NRCA in seeking the exemption, but on its position that the regulation does not permit granting such broad exemptions based on "historical data."

OSHA officials said, however, that individual contractors may be able to use NRCA-collected "historical data" to gain exemption on specific jobs, provided the jobs and the data meet the regulation's requirements for similarity.

OSHA also stated that it may be possible to gain exemptions for specific asbestos-containing products, if "objective data" show that they cannot release fibers in excess of the action level under worse-case conditions. NRCA plans to conduct such laboratory tests for a number of roofing materials.

OSHA emphasized that its denial of exemption from the initial air monitoring requirement was not based on the now-discredited Johns Manville test results or any other data in the OSHA files.

In response to NRCA inquiries, OSHA stated that it has no evidence on file to indicate that there is a health hazard to roofing industry personnel from handling asbestos-containing roofing materials.

NRCA expressed concern that asbestos roof-removal practices currently being followed in the marketplace (the result of industry and regulation confusion) are creating more dangerous work environments.

AGC, ASA and ASC recommend new industry guidelines

Three construction associations representing more than 60,000 firms have published a series of guidelines and forms that foster fair and equitable construction practices for all members of the construction team.

Guidelines for a Successful Construction Project is a product of extensive negotiations by a liaison committee of the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), the American Subcontractors Association (ASA) and the Associated Specialty Contractors (ASC). This collection of guidelines, published as a softcover manual, revises and updates a 1986 joint publication called the *Construction Industry Survival Kit*. The manual's cornerstone is a guideline on better general contractor-subcontractor relations.

AGC, ASA and ASC recommend that local industry liaison committees use the guidelines, and that they be given to architects, consulting engineers and members of construction users' groups.

The manual contains three new guidelines adopted after the *Survival Kit* was published: boilerplate specifications and exculpatory clauses, bid shopping and bid peddling, and payment for stored materials and equipment.

Copies of the publication may be purchased through all three associations for $3.

Fairfax County prohibits plywood use in roofing

In order to address the potential failure of certain types of fire-retardant-treated (FRT) plywood used as a roof sheathing in townhouse and condominium construction, Fairfax County, Va., has initiated a new policy specifying the conditions under which the county will permit the use of FRT plywood in construction until new standards are developed, according to the Fairfax County *Weekly Agenda*.

To date, there have been no reports in Fairfax County of failure associated with the treatment process of FRT plywood. However, the widespread use of the material

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in townhouse and condominium projects under construction in the county, and the recent withdrawal of its endorsement by the American Plywood Association (APA) caused the county to take this action.

FRT plywood is typically used throughout the United States to limit the spread of fire between attached units such as townhouses and condominiums. It is installed in the roofs on either side of common walls or party walls. The plywood is pretreated in such a way that a chemical reaction called acid hydrolysis occurs to retard the spread of flames. This reaction is accelerated during a fire at temperatures in excess of 400 F.

However, it has been discovered that, at least in some types of FRT plywood, the accelerated hydrolysis may occur at temperatures as low as 150 to 200 F. These lower temperatures may be experienced in an attic during prolonged exposure to the sun's heat and humidity. Over a period of several years, FRT plywood is weakened by this process, and as a result, roofs may fail if walked upon or under the weight of snow.

Given the lack of information on specific products or tests to certify FRT materials, Fairfax County implemented a policy effective April 10 specifying the conditions for acceptance of FRT plywood for townhouses and condominiums in the design stage or under construction. Under the County Department of Environmental Management's policy, all applications for use of FRT plywood as a roof sheathing must include a certification from the plywood treatment company that the treatment will not cause accelerated acid hydrolysis at temperatures below 400 F. In addition, applicants must provide results of structural load tests performed by an accredited testing laboratory and sealed by a professional engineer.

Following issuance of the policy, the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association worked with county officials to allow units to proceed to occupancy under an agreement between the owner, the purchaser and the county.

The county has also established a forum for discussions with FRT wood manufacturers to determine product acceptability. To date, two plywood products in widespread use in new construction in the county have been deemed acceptable for use.

Fairfax County may be the only jurisdiction in the United States to enact controls on the use of FRT plywood.

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