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Thousands of Homeowners Cite Drywall for Ills

By **LESLIE WAYNE**
Published: October 7, 2009

When Bill Morgan, a retired policeman, moved into his newly built dream home in Williamsburg, Va., three years ago, his hopes were quickly dashed.

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Casey Templeton for The New York Times
Bill Morgan blames Chinese drywall for toxic fumes and corrosion in components of his home.

His wife and daughter suffered constant nosebleeds and headaches. A persistent foul odor filled the house. Every piece of metal indoors corroded or turned black.

In short order, Mr. Morgan moved out. The headaches and nosebleeds stopped, but the ensuing financial problems pushed him into [personal bankruptcy](#).

“My house is not worth the land it’s built on,” said Mr. Morgan, who could not maintain the mortgage payments on his \$383,000 home in a Williamsburg subdivision called Wellington Estates and the costs of a rental property where his family decamped.

Mr. Morgan, like many other American homebuyers who tell similar tales of woe, is blaming the drywall in his new home — specifically, drywall from China, imported during the housing boom to meet heavy demand — that he says is contaminated with various sulfur compounds.

Hundreds of lawsuits are piling up in state and federal courts, and a consolidated class action is moving forward in Louisiana before Judge Eldon E. Fallon of Federal District Court, who will begin hearing cases in January.

Three hundred cases have been filed in Louisiana alone, many with similar complaints from homeowners — a noxious smell, recurrent headaches and difficulty

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Casey Templeton for The New York Times
Bill Morgan had to abandon his newly built dream home in Williamsburg, Va., blaming drywall for corrosive fumes that attacked metal objects.

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breathing. In Florida, the health department has received over 500 complaints with such symptoms.

In addition, these suits say, metal objects in homes corrode quickly, causing kitchen appliances, air-conditioners, televisions and plumbing to fail.

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“There could be 60,000 to 100,000 homes that are worthless and have to be ripped completely down and rebuilt,” said Arnold Levin, a Philadelphia lawyer and co-chairman of the plaintiffs’ steering committee.

While tainted Chinese imports like toothpaste, pet food and baby formula have been quickly removed from store shelves, drywall is installed throughout homes and does not lend itself to a quick fix.

This month, the [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#), whose investigation into Chinese drywall is the largest in its history, will release the results of a study to determine why the drywall is causing the problem, and what kind of remediation programs might be effective.

Already, the commission has sent six investigators to Chinese gypsum mines and to meet with the government there. The Chinese government’s counterpart to the federal safety commission sent two of its experts here to inspect affected homes.

The commission is also making sure that no more Chinese drywall comes into the country.

“Our ports are on alert,” said Inez Tenenbaum, chairwoman of the commission. “They are not letting any in. The market, too, has corrected. No one wants Chinese drywall.”

Even [President Obama](#) is being pressed by members of Congress to raise the issue on his November trip to China — the loudest cry coming from Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, who has traveled to China on his own to learn more about the drywall problems.

Investigators are finding that getting scientific data, establishing legal accountability and following a supply chain is difficult when so many drywall sheets — millions in all were brought into the United States — were simply marked “Made in China,” providing no clues to their actual source. The drywall was brought in because United States supplies ran low, not as a cost-saving measure for builders.

One target of the lawsuits is Knauf Plasterboard Tianjin, a German company with manufacturing plants in China that supplied about 20 percent of the Chinese drywall brought into the United States.

Don Hayden, the company’s lawyer, said that its own toxicology tests from affected homes showed that the drywall presented no health problems. Even so, he said his company was cooperating with American government investigations.

“Unlike other Chinese manufacturers, we are the only one to come to the United States to address this problem,” said Mr. Hayden. “We’ve spent considerable time and energy and hope that we can provide a workable solution to U. S. homeowners.”

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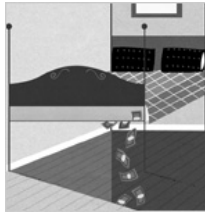


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