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Fire Retardants and Reactants—Blazing a New Path in Home Safety Building Code
By Bob Heinrich

Smoke detectors and automatic sprinkler heads are so commonplace that it's hard to imagine our parents lived and worked in buildings without even these basic fire prevention tools. We take for granted, and reasonably so, that the alarms will sound and the water will spray to allow us to make our escape from a burning structure in the nick of time. Since smoke detectors became widely available to consumers in the 1970s, they have been credited with slashing in half the death toll from home fires in the U.S.

Today, a generation after smoke detectors revolutionized residential fire safety, we are poised to make another quantum leap in the field of fire protection. The new direction is in non-toxic fire retardants and fire reactants. Rather than help people escape a burning structure, these new fire retardants and reactants actually significantly inhibit or prevent a building and its contents from catching fire in the first place. Retardants and reactants currently are being reviewed by the International Code Council Evaluations Services, Inc., which establishes building and fire standards for the nation's homebuilders.

Treading the same path as smoke detectors decades ago, fire retardants and fire reactants are heading toward what I predict will eventually become a requirement of all new-home construction.

In the meantime, builders who jump on this technology and offer retardant and reactant treatments as an option are positioning themselves to take advantage of the products, undeniable consumer appeal and to forge a strong competitive edge in the residential construction marketplace. First of all, the products virtually sell themselves. No Burn products, for example, generate significant free media attention; witness the 90 seconds devoted exclusively to No Burn on ABC's Extreme Makeover Home Edition, and the increasing number of local newscasts featuring product demonstrations.

Second, lenders and insurance companies are starting to offer discounted rates of up to 0.5 percent on mortgages and 20 percent on insurance for treated homes, thereby allowing builders who use these products to advertise better deals for their homes. And since products like No Burn also guard against mold, the list of benefits to drive customers to your business grows longer.

All this added value comes at little additional expense to the builder who typically can retain a 50 percent markup over cost. Companies like No Burn provide full support for the homebuilders' sales staff and provide professionally trained and certified applicators to complete the job.

Given the option, most homebuyers want the added protection and peace of mind that is offered by today's fire retardants and reactants--despite the success of smoke detectors.

And it won't come a day too soon. Despite the success of smoke detectors in saving untold lives, fires continue to cause 4,000 U.S. deaths a year and \$10 billion of property damage.

So what do the new fire retardants and fire reactants actually do? Retardants and reactants are applied to wood framing, walls and other combustible surfaces. Should a treated building come into contact with a flame, the retardants and reactants provide a protective barrier, resisting for some period of time, the spread of the fire. This additional delay improves the ability of occupants to escape the building and more time for the fire department to respond and extinguish the fire.

Just as in the history of smoke detectors, which took 70 years from invention to commercialization, fire retardants and reactants, which began to emerge several decades ago, got off to a rocky start. Early smoke detectors incorporated a block of butter, which melted in high heat, triggering an alarm. The original fire retardants and reactants included toxic elements subjecting workers and occupants to both short- and long-term effects.

Both ideas made a much-needed roundtrip to the drawing board.

Happily, new formulations of fire retardants and reactants are non-toxic and non-carcinogenic. The original No-Burn product, for example, is made of food-grade ingredients. The product actually was discovered by a chemist who was trying to create a food additive. Although these modern, non-toxic, non-carcinogenic fire retardants and reactants have been around now for almost a decade, they have yet to enter the public consciousness. I would be surprised if more than two percent of the American public is aware that there exists an easily applied product that can significantly limit the spread of fire in their home. But buzz about these products is growing. Internet search engines can turn up very graphic demonstrations of fire retardants in which, for example, a torch is turned on two side-by-side small-scale houses, one treated with fire retardants and one without treatment, with convincing results.

Word is getting out to the point that some elder care facilities in California are starting to advertise their fire retardant and reactant treatments in their sales pitches. Soon the marketplace will drive this new product to the forefront of fire safety and prevention measures where it rightly belongs.

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