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OFFICIALS WITHHELD CHINESE DRYWALL ALERT

E-mails - exchanged over 3 1/2 months by state and county health officials and the EPA - regarding possible dangers of Chinese drywall indicate the parties waited to coordinate with a homebuilder and its consultant on how and when to alert the public.

One Environmental Protection Agency official even suggested television "Sweeps Week" in November might be the time to tell the public, rather than acting independently from special interests and getting word to the public as soon as possible.

A press release and talking points were crafted.

The public didn't hear of the controversy until The News-Press published a story Dec. 20 indicating Chinese drywall installed in houses in Lee County and elsewhere could be causing noxious odors, air conditioning failures and health problems.

"It certainly does raise concerns," David Krause, the lead state toxicologist, said in that story.

The 207 e-mails cover more than 400 pages and range from Oct. 2, 2008 to Jan. 13, 2009.

The News-Press made a public-records request to the state Department of Health for the e-mails Jan. 9.

They show:

- No central Web site for information to be recorded and exchanged on the multiplying reports coming in from across the state was established until Dec. 12. The Web site address was redacted from the e-mails.
- The state Department of Health relied on Lennar Homes and its consultant, Environ International, for information on the cause of the drywall problem until the state began its own investigation in late January.
- Lennar discovered the drywall in dozens of its homes in August and began investigating. The verdict reported in an Oct. 2 briefing to state and county health officials and the EPA: The drywall was not a health threat.
- The Department of Health pressed Environ for copies of all research and lab results but Lennar's consultant refused to comply, saying it hadn't asked for the department's opinion. The backup data was finally turned over on or just after Dec. 23.
- The Lee County Health Department first became aware of the drywall problem Aug. 25, when a resident of Bella Terra in Estero wrote to Jim Love, county environmental health director.

"I'll keep you in the loop on this one," Love e-mailed Dr. Judith Hartner, head of the county department, Aug. 26.

But Hartner told The News-Press in a Dec. 19 interview she had not heard of reported problems.

"The reason I didn't tell you was because I frankly forgot about it," Hartner said when questioned earlier this week.

The defective drywall smells like rotten eggs and emits sulfur compounds that corrode air conditioning coils and damages other metals inside the home, including pitting faucets, blackening silver jewelry and eating away at copper wires inside electrical outlets.

Residents in homes with the drywall have complained of a variety of health symptoms, including nosebleeds, respiratory problems, headaches, nausea and skin itching that disappears when residents leave their homes and come back when they return.

The first complaints started filtering in to the county and state health departments in late July and August. Those earliest complaints were mainly from Lee and Collier counties, said Bob Kallotte of the Sarasota County Health Department, the point man who deals with complaints coming from Southwest Florida. But no information was given to the public over the subsequent weeks and months, as more reports came from Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, Sarasota, Martin, Pinellas, St. Lucie, Manatee, until most counties in Florida were affected.

Krause said this week the state didn't release information because there were no conclusions.

"It is important for us to confirm and not rely on speculation," Krause said. "Our first step was to determine whether this was a public health issue or not, or was this an individual builder."

The department's concern is whether the drywall poses a health threat to residents, said Krause, who began working on his own investigation in late January.

"As yet we haven't seen sufficient data to issue a health advisory or a health warning," he said.

Slack's second Nov. 6 e-mail reinforces the EPA was more than a mere bystander and in fact sought to be involved in decision-making.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to suggest that we offer to coordinate publicity with the Lab and this builder," Slack said, referring to Lennar and its consultant. "I am getting calls from homeowners about other builders, and predict that this story will break soon."

Slack continued: "But since this could be a BIG story in Florida, so whenever Lennar wants to announce, or the story breaks otherwise, that FDOH have a press release prepared that hits on the important issues - how Bob (Kallotte) is a hero, how the state DOH is involved, what the State Toxicologist has to say, and that this does not seem to be an immediate health issue, so we have been waiting to learn more."

When asked about the e-mails, Slack reiterated the EPA didn't have information to provide, but Lennar did.

When Krause was asked for comment, he said "we don't control Mr. Slack."

While Slack sought to coordinate with Lennar, Krause told health department staff Nov. 3 to press Lennar for its data backing up its conclusion the drywall is not a health threat.

Krause, who was not at the Oct. 2 Environ/Lennar briefing because he joined the state health department later in October, objected to Environ's memo on the briefing, received a month later.

Krause and others in the department believed Environ characterized the state and county health officials at the meeting as agreeing with Environ's assessment there was no health threat.

"This appears to be a misunderstanding," Clark Eldredge, environmental administrator for the state's radon and indoor air program, wrote to Robert DeMott, toxicologist and Environ managing principal, Nov. 6.

"Any comments made by DOH personnel during the conference call should not have been interpreted that there is no health risk from the reduced sulfur gases you detected in your study," he wrote.

In fact, there isn't sufficient data for the department to offer an opinion, Eldredge wrote: "Should you provide us an appropriate set of research data, we would be able to evaluate it for health risks."

No thanks, DeMott wrote back Dec. 17.

Environ is not saying the state agreed there is no health threat, DeMott wrote. His summary of the Oct. 2 meeting simply reflected everyone there acknowledged the low levels of sulfur gases emitting from the drywall were below any established risk exposure levels, DeMott said.

Furthermore, Environ recognizes its interpretation of the data is theirs alone "and that the department has not been asked for, nor provided its interpretations," DeMott wrote. Environ finally sent some of its backup research on or shortly after Dec. 23 but the total amount of data has still not been sent, Krause said last week.

"The confidence in the data right now is much higher," Krause said. "So far I haven't seen anything that overly concerns me that the data is false or inappropriate."

The department is now much more involved, having seen many of the affected homes and moving into another, more detailed phase of its investigation, Krause said.

The health department has limited funds to pursue the issue, he said.

"We have to choose carefully the types of analysis we are doing," he said.

But the department is working with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and all are trying to figure out what resources they have and expertise they can lend to the issue, Krause said.

"We're not sitting on our hands" he said.