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Alternatives in Low-Density Foam

Until recently, Canada's Icynene (800/758-7325) was the only company in North America offering low-density spray foam insulation to home builders. Now, however, a second company, Quebec-based Demilec (514/437-0123), has introduced a very similar product at a competitive price.

Demilec, Canada's largest producer of high-density spray polyurethane insulation, is promoting its new low-density foam, *Sealection*, through an established network of commercial high-density-foam contractors.

Demilec executive Dave Lall says commercial high-density-foam contractors asked the company to develop

a less expensive product they could sell to residential builders. "The residential market is ten times the size of the commercial market," says Lall. "We haven't even seen the tip of the iceberg yet."

Generic foam? Several U.S. urethane suppliers are also poised to enter the arena with their own versions of the water-blown foam. Although officials could give no details, the Canadian Center for Materials in Construction (CCMC), which provided Icynene and Demilec with the evaluations necessary for code approval in Canada, has received three more requests for certification of low-density-foam formulations. CCMC reportedly has plans to create



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New versions of low-density foam mean a wider range of lower-priced alternatives.

a general performance standard for the low-density-foam industry. Formerly a one-brand category, the material is on its way to becoming a generic product like fiberglass. As that happens, it is likely to

drop in price and become much more widely available.

Icynene's reaction. Graham Kirkland, Icynene's top executive, says that the industry will benefit from the *continued*

Educating Contractors About ADA

Most builders and remodelers are in the dark when it comes to the requirements of the federal Americans with

Disabilities Act (ADA). That's the conclusion drawn by staff of the Home Builders Institute (HBI), an educa-

tional arm of the NAHB, after conducting early seminars on the topic at NAHB gatherings.

The ADA law was passed in 1990 to prevent discrimination against people with handicaps. Among other provisions, it requires business and public facilities to provide access to disabled people. New construction projects must include elements like wheelchair ramps, power doors, and accessible bathrooms. And in existing buildings, owners must remove any barriers that block the disabled from tak-

ing advantage of services available to everyone else.

Since ADA does not cover single-family homes, most residential contractors aren't much affected by it — although anyone with a showroom or model unit has to make those facilities accessible. In commercial work, on the other hand, even a small job on a facility like a dentist's office or a local store has to take the ADA's requirements into account.

Education, not enforcement. Under a grant from *continued*



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Access modifications required by the ADA can be done gradually as funds become available. Tax credits and deductions can help offset the costs.

STATE BY STATE

New York. Thousands of Long Island homeowners left in the lurch by storm-shy insurance companies may find relief under a state-mandated Coastal Market Assistance Program (C-MAP), according to June 24th's *Newsday*. Insurers in the program voluntarily underwrite policies for homes in flood or storm zones on a rotating basis. Pressure from Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato has also spurred state insurance regulators to step up enforcement efforts in coastal areas, the newspaper said.

California. The state Energy Commission's *Energy Efficiency Standards* can now be accessed online from a Web site at www.energy.ca.gov, according to a news release. For telephone information on the standards, call the commission's hot line at 916/654-5106.

Tennessee. A new state law cracks down on workers comp insurance fraud, with penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment, as well as automatic restitution. The law requires insurers to develop and implement comp antifraud plans or face fines. Health practitioners convicted of participating in fraudulent claim schemes would also face penalties, including license revocation.

Buying Lumber on the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web started out as a gee-whiz wonderland, good for entertainment and not much else. But increasingly the Web is becoming a real business forum, where businesses can not only market their wares but actually order, buy, and sell.

Some companies will even sell building materials over the Web. A perfect example is Kent, Wash., wholesaler and retailer American Building Supply, whose Web site is located at www.ambico.com. In July's *Construction Business Computing* (subscription information: 800/859-3669), contractor Douglas McMillin described using the Web to contact the lumber company and order building materials for a project in the remote Colorado town of Woody Creek.

"Because of the shipping costs, you have to be ready to do one-stop shopping," wrote McMillin. After work-



Lumber company American Building Supply of Kent, Wash., is one of a growing number of companies geared up to do business via the Internet.

ing up a takeoff list for his whole project as an Excel spreadsheet file, McMillin e-mailed the file to American. The company's sales department entered the pricing information right into his spreadsheet and zipped it back to him.

The prices were "shockingly low" compared with the prices at his area's only lumberyard, McMillin

reports. Although shipping costs eliminated most of the difference, McMillin still saved money.

Dozens of materials suppliers now have a presence on the Web. For an updated list of Web links to lumber distributors, wholesalers, and retailers, visit the IRIS Forest Products Directory Web page at www.cdc.net/~primus/IRIS. □

Customers Want Efficient HVAC, Survey Finds

Many builders put energy efficiency high on their list of priorities. But is efficiency really an important concern of customers?

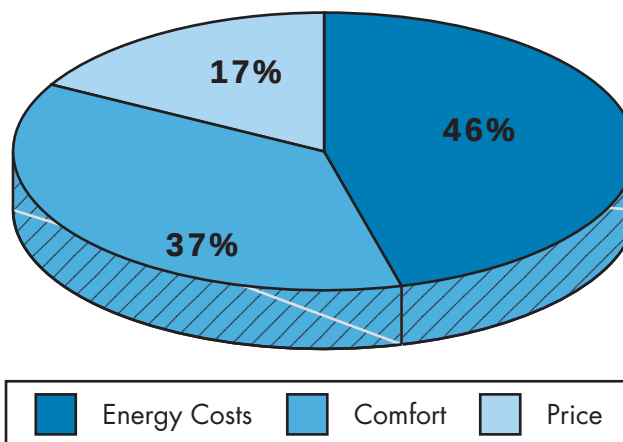
According to a survey of

80,000 households, the answer is yes. The four-year study by *Contracting Business Magazine* (216/696-7000) found that 46% of sampled homeowners consider operating expense

the most important factor in choosing a heating or cooling system. A smaller group, 37%, listed comfort as their top concern. The price of the system came in a distant last: Only 17% of respondents named it as their first priority.

Among the survey's other major findings: a large majority of homeowners nationwide want air conditioning in their next new home, and almost half of households complain that their present hvac system leaves some rooms either too hot or too cold.

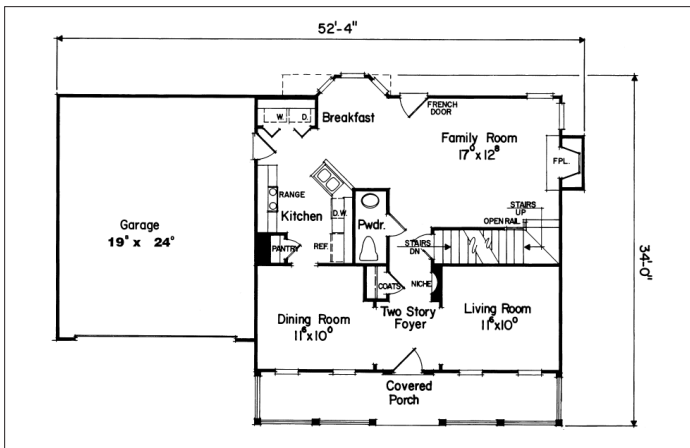
If you'd like more details, the full survey report is available from *Contracting Business Magazine* at 216/696-7000. □



Small Homes Can Feel Big

In recent years, as employment has grown but wages and salaries have lagged, working families with steady but modest incomes have become a growing segment of the home-buying public. *Homestyles Report*, a newsletter of the Homestyles home plan company, says statistics compiled by Chicago Title and Trust, the nation's largest

homes. But its most popular plans in that category include elements designed to make the small homes feel more spacious and comfortable. "The five best sellers all feature high ceilings," notes the newsletter. "In each one, the kitchen opens to a casual eating area, and sometimes a living area also, creating extra room in this always busy space."



This small home's design includes 14-foot ceilings in the dining room and master suite, and a "great room" with a fireplace. The plan is a top seller for Homestyles.

title insurance firm, show the share of buyers with family incomes below \$40,000 rising from 25% to 31% between 1994 and 1995, while the percentage of buyers earning between \$41,000 and \$60,000 dwindled from 32% to 27%. Census figures indicate that a typical family earning \$35,000 can afford a home costing around \$109,000.

Homestyles targets that market with plans for modest-sized

Homestyles sells a range of plan books dealing with particular styles and sizes, including a new volume focusing on affordability produced in cooperation with Habitat for Humanity. And for \$34.95 you can get a multimedia Windows CD-ROM containing 3,003 plans of all types. For more information, call at 800/547-5570, or visit the Homestyles Web page (www.homestyles.com). □

FROM WHAT WE GATHER

The city of Portland, Ore., has approved plans for five-story wood-frame buildings as part of a city redevelopment effort. Portland follows Seattle, Wash., as the second city to approve wood-frame buildings taller than four stories. City planners see the five-story apartment buildings as a key part of Portland's strategy to reduce suburban sprawl by increasing residential development within the city proper.

Heck no, we won't go hard metric, says the National Concrete Masonry Association, a collection of small companies making concrete block. The *Washington Post* reports that the group is pushing legislation to exempt block from metric requirements on federal projects. While the companies have been willing to make the "soft metric" adjustment (relabeling their 7.58-inch block as 194 millimeters), they refuse to retool and make 7.48-inch block so that the metric measurement would be a round 190 millimeters. The cost of the conversion could total \$500 million, they say — too much in an industry where profits are only two cents a block.

Another big study has thrown doubt on the radon-cancer link. The July *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* published a report by Finnish scientists who compared radon exposures of lung cancer victims with the radon exposures of healthy Finns. After correcting for confounding influences like cigarette smoking, the researchers found no significant association between lung cancer and the naturally occurring unstable radioactive gas. While high doses of radon have been shown to cause cancer in underground uranium miners, scientists remain divided over the potential threat posed by the tiny amounts of radon detected in homes.

Framing with steel? Want instructions? The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has just published a \$5 guidebook, *Prescriptive Method for Residential Cold-Formed Steel Framing*. The book, which includes span tables and fastener schedules, is based on three years of HUD-sponsored work at the NAHB Research Center. Since HUD has no part in creating or enforcing building codes, however, details in the book should still be checked with local building officials. To order a copy, call HUD-USER at 800/245-2691.

Multifunction office equipment may not work as well as machines designed to do a single job, according to a report in *Business Consumer Guide* (800/938-0088). The staff of the monthly publication recently evaluated 40 machines billed as all-in-one units providing fax, modem, printing, and photocopying capabilities. According to their tests, few of the units could do even one or two of those tasks as well as a single-function unit.

Low-Density Foam, *continued*

increased competition. But Icynene "is not going to over-react," he told *JLC*. Kirkland believes Icynene still has the better product and remains price competitive.

Training and certification. To sell its product in Canada, Demilec must train installers in accordance with Canadian codes. The standards require foam applicators to show building inspectors a photo I.D. certifying that they have passed training courses approved by the Canadian Urethane Foam Contractors Association (CUFCA). No such rules govern U.S. installers, but Lall says his company is holding to the same intent in training its U.S. applicators: Installers who already have experience with a low-density foam such as Icynene need only pass a one-day practical and written exam, but anyone lacking such experience must spend several days in training at Demilec's Quebec facilities.

Contractors sign up. Insulation contractors considering Demilec were wary after

early trials showed the foam to shrink in place. But CCMC's Bruno DeLeonardo said the minor shrinkage had no effect on the insulation's performance. And Demilec said minor formula changes have eliminated the shrinkage. Several experienced foam contractors have now picked up the new product, including Standard Insulating (315/738-1424) of Utica, N.Y., and Foam-Tech (802/333-4333) based in North Thetford, Vt.

Since starting with Icynene in the early 1990s, says Standard Insulating's owner Chuck Scholl, he has seen foam displace fiberglass, growing from 10% of his business to 90%. But foam's price is still a factor, Scholl explains, and he can offer Demilec's foam for 15% less than Icynene, installed. Even at that discount, a foam job costs more than double the price of a fiberglass installation.

Comparing foams. Demilec's foam is chemically similar to Icynene's. As with Icynene, blowing Demilec involves no CFC-based compounds. Instead, the two components of the foam mix in

the application gun, and a chemical reaction between them produces steam and carbon dioxide, causing the foam to expand rapidly. Slight differences in the formulas and application procedures for the two products result in only minor performance differences.

A report comparing Demilec and Icynene in July's *Energy Design Update* drew fire from both companies. Icynene's Kirkland took exception to *EDU*'s description of the foams as "nearly identical," pointing to differences in the reported values for flame spread and vapor permeance. Demilec executives, on the other hand, said that the different values *EDU* reported for some qualities represented testing under varying conditions, and claimed that the two products showed no important differences when given identical tests.

Lab values aside, insulation contractors who have tried both foams in the field do not see much difference. In general, business considerations, not product characteristics, seem to be their main reason for choosing one or the other.

CCMC's DeLeonardo says the Canadian group evaluated both Icynene and Demilec foams as insulation only, not as air-barrier materials. "As insulation, they both work," he says. "Each one has an R-value, a perm rating, a flame spread rating, and so on. You can compare for yourself."

The CCMC Registry of Product Evaluations, containing evaluation reports for 800 products including Icynene and Demilec insulations, is available for free from CCMC (613/993-2463).

Scholl says performance differences between the two foam products are insignificant — both can seal homes effectively. Blower-door testing of homes participating in Connecticut's Energy Crafted Homes program show Demilec-insulated homes to be as tightly sealed as those foamed with Icynene, he reports. Demilec does require a poly vapor barrier, Scholl agrees, but he says that Icynene also should be installed with poly in high-humidity buildings to prevent condensation. □

About ADA, *continued*

the Justice Department, the HBI is creating an educational program to inform contractors about the ADA. Dan Mosser, manager of that project, says builders remain confused about the law. One reason, he says, is that many state codes have adopted accessibility rules that vary from the ADA requirements. Although state requirements may be more stringent in some respects, says Mosser, satisfying state codes doesn't mean you've complied with the ADA.

On the other hand, Mosser points out, the ADA is intended to be flexible, even where state codes are not. If a

business lacks funds to make wholesale improvements, it's okay to make changes slowly as the money becomes available. And a 15% tax deduction, along with a \$5,000 tax credit for small business, will help to offset any cost of barrier removal.

mational programs like the HBI project will achieve the law's goals over time.

Learning pays off. When the act was passed, some remodelers expected a big increase in barrier-removal work. But the anticipated rush of ADA-related jobs

about accessibility standards have paid off by improving the firm's ability to handle new building and renovation jobs, where access rules have entered the state's commercial building code.

Knowledge can also improve a remodeler's cost-competitiveness: While customers may expect complying with the law to cost a lot of money, notes Plageman, "In most cases we found less expensive ways. It wasn't all that hard."

For more information about the ADA, call the Justice Department's ADA hot line at 800/514-0301. For information on HBI educational efforts, call 800/795-7955. □

In most cases, there are less expensive ways to comply with the law

The law allows disabled individuals to sue businesses that fail to provide equal access to facilities. But so far, there is no other enforcement of the ADA's requirements. Instead, the government is hoping infor-

never came, according to Mike Plageman of Plageman, Kirby, Gagnon, and Daughters, a Williston, Vt., firm specializing in access modifications.

But Plageman says his company's efforts to learn