

NOTEBOOK

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Pressure Builds on P-T Lumber



The wave of public concern about the safety of CCA-treated lumber (see “New Arsenic Scare Puts Spotlight on PT Lumber,” *Notebook*, 6/01) was ratcheted up a notch last fall with the appearance of a controversial report from a Washington, D.C.-based environmental organization. The Environmental Working Group tested samples of new pressure-treated lumber at Home Depot and Lowe’s lumberyards in 13 metropolitan areas by passing a moistened swab over a 100-square-centimeter surface — an area it compared to the size of a four-year-old child’s handprint — and sending the swabs to a government-certified lab for analysis.

Each swab was found to have picked up an average of nearly 250 micrograms of arsenic. Based on the residue levels measured, the group estimated that “one out of every 500 children who regularly

play on swing sets and decks made from arsenic-treated wood, or one child in an average-size elementary school, will develop lung or bladder cancer later in life as a result of these exposures.”

That conclusion has been hotly contested by the wood treatment industry, which continues to maintain that CCA-treated wood is safe. But consumers are obviously worried about treated lumber, and that concern seems likely to affect the regulations that govern its use. Soon after the Environmental Working Group’s report was released, both houses of Congress passed a bill requiring the EPA to accelerate its ongoing review of the treated-wood question, which had originally been scheduled for completion in 2003. The agency now has until February 15 to publish its findings. Given the level of fear and uncertainty surrounding the issue, many industry observers believe that substantial restrictions on the use of treated wood will not be far behind.

California Home Buyers Discover Basements

Mention “basements” and “California” in the same breath and many people think, “Huh?” With no need to excavate beneath the frost line and an abundance of unstable soils, California builders have long made inexpensive slab-on-grade foundations the standard. But that may be about to change. As land prices continue to expand and lot sizes contract, basements are emerging as one answer to the continuing California quest for larger and larger homes.

“We’re going up now, and we’re going to start going down,” says Devon Hartman, a contractor in Claremont, Calif., whose firm is build-

ing a basement library for a client. “There really is nowhere else to go to give [our clients] the square footage they want,” says Hartman’s partner Bill

Baldwin. Baldwin explains that the basement-library client’s existing house covered 36% of the lot, leaving no

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Once all but unknown in California, basements are becoming popular among homeowners looking for additional living space on tight lots.

BUSINESS TUNE-UP

Protect Your Data With an Uninterruptible Power Supply by Melanie Hodgdon

Most contractors consider spending \$2,000 for a computer, printer, and software to be a given for even the most modest office. Surprisingly few, however, spend the additional \$200 to \$300 for an uninterruptible power supply, or UPS.

A UPS does two useful things: First, it protects against both minor and major fluctuations in power. Biggies like a lightning strike may fry your components, but it's often the undetected little surges and momentary brownouts that mess up your data and shorten the life of your hard drive. One of my clients, for example, had a cabinet shop that shared the same circuit as the company office. The shared circuitry caused voltage spikes when the shop machines were turned off at the end of the day. Unprotected by a UPS, the two office computers began garbling and losing data and eventually failed completely.

Second, the battery backup provided by a UPS allows you a "shut down" period in the event of a power outage. The UPS pays for itself even if you're using software that backs up automatically, because it prevents

you from losing that important drawing or document entered after the last time the system backed itself up. Reliable UPS brands include APC, Tripp-Lite, and Belkin.

UPSs are rated in volt-amps (VA). The higher the VA number, the longer the unit will be able to "hold" the system in the event of a power outage. To



see what your system requires, check out the amperage rating on the back of your computer CPU and your monitor. My 19-inch monitor, for example, is rated at .9 to 1.8 amps, and my 1.5-GHz CPU draws 3.0 to 6.0 amps. Add the average of the range for each (in my case, $1.35 + 4.5$) and multiply by

120 volts ($5.85 \times 120 = 702$ volt-amps). Then multiply that by .75 to yield a typical moment-to-moment draw (mine comes out to 526.5). You'll need a UPS with the next highest VA rating. A VA of 600-650 will generally be sufficient if you have a 17-inch monitor and your clock speed is over 800 MHz.

I also prefer a UPS unit that provides surge-protected outlets as well as outlets that are both surge-protected and battery-backed. At a minimum, you'll need two surge-protected, battery-backed outlets: one for your monitor and one for your CPU. You can use the surge-only outlets for speakers, a scanner, your fax machine, your answering machine, and some printers. Most UPS instructions will warn you about plugging in laser printers since they make high and sudden demands. If you have a couple of AC adapters that need to be plugged in, be sure the orientation and spacing of the outlets on the UPS will permit you to plug in what's needed. Most UPS units also have inputs and outputs for your phone line to prevent your modem from getting fried by a lightning strike.

NAHB Remodeler Training to Focus on Needs of Older Homeowners

By the year 2010, well over 20 million U.S. households will fall within the 55-64 age bracket. Many of those aging baby boomers are expected to remain in their existing homes rather than move in to new housing — giving rise to the so-called "aging-in-place" market that is emerging as one of the fastest-growing segments of today's residential remodeling industry.

Remodelers who would like to tap into that market may want to look into a new program sponsored jointly by the NAHB Remodelers Council and Seniors Housing Council, the NAHB Research Center, and the AARP. The

CAPS (for "Certified Aging in Place Specialist") program is designed to train remodelers to work effectively with seniors, perform needs assessments and install required home modifications, and market their skills effectively. The three-day course will be offered for the first time at the NAHB Seniors Housing Symposium in Orlando, Fla., in the beginning of May 2002. The Remodelers Council then expects to take the program on the road, making it available through regional home builders' associations and at national trade shows. For details, contact the Remodelers Association at 800/368-5242, ext. 8231.

Hinged Truss Plates Provide an Alternative to Piggyback Trusses

Dealing with piggyback trusses can be a major headache. When restrictions on shipping size dictate a two-part truss design, there's suddenly twice as much paperwork and twice as many trusses to handle. One or two bowed chords can mean hours of shimmying and fussing with alignment. Worse yet, piggybacking doubles the chance that one or more of the trusses you order

is nailed off with the specified pneumatic fasteners. Although the company originally expected builders to unfold and fasten the peak section on the ground before craning the trusses into place, many builders have found it easier to lift them in the closed position, attach and brace them, then raise the peak once the roof deck has been sheathed as far up as the hinges.



A new folding truss plate (inset) permits the manufacture of compact, easily shipped folding roof trusses, providing an alternative to piggyback designs.

won't make it onto the truck in the first place, throwing the job schedule hopelessly out of whack.

But Mitek, the Missouri-based truss plate manufacturer, thinks it has found the answer. The company recently adapted an existing hinged truss plate — an item long used by modular home manufacturers — for use with most common residential truss designs and incorporated the feature into the newest version of its design software. The system has proven simple and convenient. The top chords of the truss are mounted on hinged plates, then folded and blocked temporarily in place for shipping. When they arrive at the job site, the trusses are unfolded and the unattached end of the peak connector

Pete Sieben, sales manager for Sprowl Building Components in Searsmont, Maine, notes that builders who have used the system are enthusiastic about it. "It saves a lot of labor," he says, "and it costs about the same or a little less than doing it the old way." Company owner George Sprowl reports that the hinged design has virtually replaced piggyback trusses for all but the largest roofs. "That's been great," he says, "because piggybacks probably accounted for 90% of our call-backs. Now those problems have gone away." For more information, contact Mitek Industries, 14515 N. Outer 40 Dr., Suite 300, Chesterfield, MO 63017; 800/325-2556; www.mitekinc.com.

OFFCUTS

American users of the Internet now spend 9.8 hours a week online, according to a recent study by UCLA. In a similar study a year earlier, that figure stood at 9.4 hours. The study also found that television viewing has gone down as Internet usage has gone up, with Internet users watching 4.5 fewer hours than non-Internet users.

Many sawmills in the Northwest are now paying more for small logs than for larger ones, according to an article in the *Puget Sound Business Journal*. The article noted that products made from larger logs — such as plywood, wide boards, and heavy timbers — are losing market share to engineered lumber products, which can be made from much smaller logs. The increasing scarcity of large trees also means that relatively few mills are equipped to handle larger logs.

Today's home buyers place more importance on timely completion than on quality of workmanship and materials, according to a recent survey of 45,000 buyers of newly constructed homes conducted by J.D. Power and Associates. Of the nine factors examined, home readiness was second only to customer service.

Dirt to Go

Do you need dirt, or have excess dirt you'd like to get rid of? If so, and if your job site is in an area of California served by Dirtmarket.com, you may be in luck. Company founder Dave Rossi describes his web-based business as "a dating service for dirt." It works like this: A subscribing contractor with a hole to fill or excess dirt to dispose of can post the relevant information on the company's website and search the site for users with needs that dovetail with his own. Clicking on a post from another user opens a map with driving directions to the site, thanks to a partnership between Dirtmarket and the online map service Map Quest.

While Dirtmarket doesn't handle the

details of the transaction — it's up to the parties themselves to contact one another and close the deal — the system has the effect of putting small and large builders on a more equal footing. "It allows people to cross boundaries," says Rossi. "A small grading company or landscaper can't walk up to the front door of a big commercial highway contractor to ask about dirt, but he can do it through our site."

For now, Dirtmarket's operations are limited to Los Angeles, Sacramento, and the San Francisco Bay area. By later this year, though, the company hopes to expand to the East Coast, most likely in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The cost of a year's subscription to the site varies from \$400 to \$2,400, depending on the business volume of the member company.

California Task Force to Develop Exposure Limits for Toxic Mold

The State of California recently launched the nation's first comprehensive effort to address the complex liability issues associated with toxic mold. The Toxic Mold Protection Act of 2001 was signed into law by Governor Gray Davis in October and became effective on January 1, 2002.

The new law requires the California State Department of Health Services to convene a task force that will include medical experts, government representatives, consumers, and representatives of affected industries, including builders and insurers. The task force will evaluate the health risk posed by mold; set standards for identification, assessment, and remediation of mold; and develop permissible exposure limits to mold.

Once standards have been adopted, landlords and other property owners will be required to notify tenants or other occupants if they know or have cause to believe that toxic molds are present in their buildings. However, the new law specifically forbids Health Services from requiring owners to test for mold — an omission that critics say will encourage property owners to avoid finding out about potential problems. That could invite the kind of costly litigation that the act was intended to prevent.

OFFCUTS

A Rochester, New York, carpenter has been awarded \$1.2 million for injuries received in a fall from a roof in 1998. According to the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 41-year-old Toby Jennejahn fell from the roof of a new house when he stepped on a loose truss, landing on a boulder 10 feet below and fracturing his spine. Two companies — MJC Contracting and Bierworth-Riedman Construction Company — were found responsible for Jennejahn's injuries because they had not provided him with proper safety equipment. Jennejahn was permanently disabled in the accident and now works as a handyman.

A Japanese company has developed a line of curtains designed to prevent "sick building syndrome," according to the Tokyo *Nikkei Weekly*. Kawashima Textile's Vita 2001 curtains are said to use a special photocatalyst to convert harmful chemicals into carbon and hydrogen. The curtains are said to be effective against formaldehyde, toluene, xylene, styrene, and ethylbenzene. They are available in 328 designs with 119 patterns and cost about \$20 per square meter.

Sixty-four Texas homeowners have filed a \$65 million lawsuit against the builder who constructed their homes on a former bombing range, the *New York Times* reports. The residents of the Southbridge Hills development in Arlington contend that KB Home knew but failed to disclose that the land had been used for bombing practice by the navy during World War II. The suit also claims that Los Angeles-based KB Home ignored a government recommendation to hire a contractor to remove any unexploded bombs that might be present.

Rocky Mountain Rust

In most areas, rusty metal roofing is seen as a sign of age or neglect. But in the Colorado mountains, many homeowners prefer the rustic mining-town appearance of rusted roofing, and area builders have found a way to accommodate them. Ungalvanized 24-gauge corrugated steel has emerged as the material of choice in many areas, because it swiftly develops the sought-after patina of rust. According to



Rusted corrugated steel roofs have become popular in parts of Colorado, where even the well-to-do — like the owners of this ranch in the Ridgeway Valley — prefer a rustic, weathered look.

Chuck Kroger, a general contractor in the ski resort town of Telluride who has been installing rusted roofing for ten years, the region's cold, dry climate seems to prevent the material from rusting all the way through for many years. "I haven't seen a roof rust through yet," he says. Kroger also finds that although the heavy-gauge material is harder to cut and fasten than typical 28-gauge galvanized roofing panels, its greater strength and stiffness make it more resistant to ice damage in valleys.

Unlike CorTen weathering steel roofing — a patented alloy-steel material designed to develop a perfectly uniform coating of rust that never penetrates much beneath the surface — the plain, ungalvanized material used in Colorado rusts in a variegated pattern that many customers prefer. "The rust varies from panel to panel, which gives it a sort of rough, natural look," Kroger says. Too much variation, though, can be a problem: The occasional roof panel that comes from the mill with a surface film of oil can stubbornly resist rusting for years, spoiling the effect. To avoid such unsightly rust-free patches, Kroger washes the completed roof with white vinegar to jump-start the rusting process.

California Home Buyers

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room for expansion without coming into conflict with the 40% limit for lot coverage imposed by city ordinance.

Other basements have recently been built in such exclusive Southern California cities as Brentwood, Santa Monica, and Rossmore. In the San Francisco Bay area, homes have been lifted up and basements dug out below.

But the newfound popularity of basements isn't limited to high-end housing. In Bakersfield, Lifestyle Homes of California offers modest tract homes with a basement option. And in Las Vegas — which some consider an

annex of California — American West and other builders have begun offering basement options to their customers.

Despite the high cost of basement space — Bill Baldwin estimates that it costs 50% to 100% more than above-grade space once the necessary excavation and waterproofing are factored in — buyers are sold on the concept. "It was a major selling point for us," says Emily Bloomfield, who, along with her husband, bought a lot in Santa Monica with approved plans that included a 1,400-square-foot basement. With three small children and a large extended family, the couple needed a larger house than above-grade construction would allow.

According to Jane Cunningham, who sells homes in the Summerlin area of Las Vegas, the 72 walk-out basements she sold recently were well received, especially by transplants from the East Coast. "[Buyers] love them," she says. "I wish I had a zillion of them."

So far, though, no large builders are planning tracts of basement homes in Southern California. "It's too risky," says Tom Noon, western regional president with D.R. Horton. "In building, you avoid dealing with uncertainty. We don't work with subs who do this kind of work — the masons or the concrete guys."

