Letters

Dangers of Oily Rags

In the article "Safety Lessons" (8/06), you described the fire we had in 2004 at our paint shop facility. I would like to point out that the employee did not toss the oily rags into an open trash container, as was mentioned, but placed them in a bucket of water, as recommended. Unfortunately he neglected to put a cover on the container, which was placed outside on a wooden loading dock.

The fire marshal's inspection pointed to a spread of flames across the wooden dock that reached the overhead doors. My guess is that the rags caught fire inside the bucket or the bucket was tipped by a curious raccoon. Regardless, this illustrates the very serious hazards that can result from the disposal of rags soaked with linseed oil or similar compounds.

In conversations after the fire, I heard many tales about dumpster fires — even one about a pile of oiled wipes left on a floor during a lunch break that ignited. Considerable care must be taken with their disposal.

Stephen Malcom, President
Boothbay Home Builders
Boothbay, Maine

Standards for Home Inspectors Vary

As the president of the Examination Board of Professional Home Inspectors, I want to thank you for including mention of the National Home Inspector Exam in the item about the West Virginia licensing law (*In the News,* 10/06).

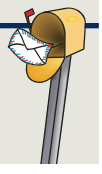
I would love to say that my state is at least equal to the 18 other states that require passing the NHIE for licensing and registration purposes.

However, as a member of Maryland's Commission of Real Estate Appraisers and Home Inspectors, I am embarrassed to admit that we will soon be required to issue licenses to those who have done nothing more than attend a 48-hour course, with no proof of proficiency of any kind.

J.D. Grewell
Silver Spring, Md.

KEEP 'EM COMING!

Letters must be signed and include the writer's address. *JLC* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and clarity. Mail to *JLC,* 186 Allen Brook Lane, Williston, VT 05495; or e-mail to jlc-editorial@hanleywood.com.



FEMA Flood Insurance Complaint

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you are wrong to suggest that homeowners would receive insurance protection against flooding from the National Flood Insurance Program (*In the News,* 10/06).

Here in La Crosse, Wis. — some 1,000 miles north of New Orleans and also located on the Mississippi — hundreds of frustrated homeowners have been required to purchase flood insurance over the years, as mandated by FEMA. Every five years or so, there is significant property damage due to flooding in many houses located in the flood-plain areas of our city.

Yet to my knowledge, no homeowner here has ever collected from FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program. The reason is that most of the damage is caused by seepage from the high standing water that makes its way into basements or, on occasion, into low main floors.

FEMA, however, makes the distinction between this and "moving water." In other words, only if and when the dikes break here in La Crosse (something that, fortunately, has not happened in the past 40 years) would a property owner have even a marginal chance of collecting insurance monies for flooding from high river waters.

Bill Katra
La Crosse, Wis.

Return of the Nerd

First off, after 50 years in the trades, this is my favorite trade mag — but the article by Martin Holladay ("Efficiency Dos and Don't From an Energy Nerd," 10/06) was a real stinker.

While he did have some good arguments, there are so many points he either missed or misunderstood, I won't bother with most.

He needs to understand that no house should be 100 percent compact fluorescent. Mine is probably 70 percent.

The heat-recovery drain is probably not practical.

Normally, insulation is not needed in the basement; in fact, most of the time it's a terrible idea. I spent 15 years in Chicago doing lots of basements; when we had a 16-inch rain and substations were shut down, those with insula-

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tion had huge problems. None of mine needed to be torn out. I figured payback once at over 30 years. Also, mold and mildew are issues.

The biggest gaffe was his stance on humidifiers. They are not only a great convenience, but should be mandated in the North. The wood structure needs humidity, the wood trim and doors need humidity, furniture needs humidity, people need humidity, and your fuel bill wants humidity for comfort. The human body is more sensitive to humidity than to temperature. He needs to do a lot of studying on the subject; it's really quite interesting.

Meanwhile, he makes no mention of vapor barriers, which are critical in both the North and the South for different reasons.

Otherwise, keep up the good work.

Craig Brown
The Domicile Doctor
Duluth, Ga.

Martin Holladay responds: Mr. Brown raises five objections to my article; I'll address them in turn.

1. It's commendable that 70 percent of the lamps in Mr. Brown's house are compact fluorescent — but I'm not sure why he insists that "no house should be 100 percent compact fluorescent" unless he's worried about the light bulbs in his refrigerator and oven.

I'm happy to concede that it makes sense to use incandescent lamps inside of appliances.

2. Mr. Brown provides no reasoning to back up his statement that a drain-water heat-recovery device like the GFX "is probably not practical."

The GFX has been on the market for more than a decade, and several field studies have documented the energy savings resulting from its use. A GFX saves between 15 percent and 21 percent of the energy used for domestic hot water; in a house where most residents take showers rather than baths, the savings are even higher — in the range of 25 percent to 30 percent.

3. Like Mr. Brown, I am no fan of fiberglass batts installed on the interior of basement walls; that's why the article noted, "Never use fiberglass batts to insulate basement walls. Exterior basement insulation usually performs better than interior basement insulation."

However, the assertion that basement wall insulation is "normally not needed" is incorrect. The International Energy Conservation Code requires basement wall insulation in climate zones 4 and higher — an area that includes Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, and Virginia, and all areas to the north.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of Energy has proposed a code change that would extend the area where basement wall insulation is required to include zone 3, where Mr. Brown resides.

In a 2003 study supporting the proposal, the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory calculated that the simple payback period for basement wall insulation installed in Atlanta is less than five years — considerably shorter than the 30 years mentioned by Mr. Brown.

4. Although Mr. Brown asserts that wood framing, furniture, and people all need humidity, he neglects to explain why wood-framed houses in Arizona are filled with sound furniture and healthy people, many of whom moved to the Southwest to enjoy the health benefits of the state's desert climate. Furniture is not damaged by dry air — but it can be damaged by sudden changes in the indoor humidity level.

As the article noted, in a cold climate, very dry indoor air during the winter is usually a sign that the house is leaky; tightening the house should make the air less dry.

Many other factors affect indoor humidity levels, including the number of residents per square foot, the frequency of showers, the type of cooking performed in the house, and the number of houseplants.

Of course, some homeowners use humidifiers in winter without causing any damage to their homes — but if a humidifier is operated incorrectly, disastrous results are possible.

The main reason that builders should avoid installing humidifiers is liability: Any possible benefit to the builder is far outweighed by the risks.

5. Mr. Brown suggests that the article should have emphasized the critical importance of vapor retarders.

In fact, contractors and building inspectors are already well-acquainted with code requirements for vapor retarders — code requirements that, alas, have little scientific basis.

The most common moisture-transport mechanism through walls and ceilings is air leakage, not vapor diffusion. The best way to keep interior moisture from entering a wall or ceiling is not by installing a vapor retarder, but by improving the air barrier.

Obvious Disregard?

I read your magazine cover to cover every month and generally enjoy it very much. I do, however, take offense at your lack of concern regarding OSHA.

OSHA compliance is not only mandatory, it is necessary to protect the safety of those working in our trades. Our industry spends a lot of time, money, and effort to comply, and your obvious disregard is insulting.

Ed Kane
D&R Framing Contractors
Englewood, Colo.