



## Mold – An Emerging Issue, or the Next Plague?

### Prevention as a Solution

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An April, 2002 article in the Wall Street Journal on the liabilities facing commercial real-estate owners, stated, "Perhaps nowhere is the growing liability problem more apparent than with mold." The article continued, "In December, about 500 tenants of an apartment complex in New York, who alleged that mold exposure caused health problems, settled a suit against the building owner for a reported figure of as much as \$1.8 million. Insurers are increasingly excluding mold from their policies altogether, regardless of the cause, and, in effect, shifting the tab to landlords."

In California, the state legislature passed a law to study, and possibly legislate, sellers' and landlords' disclosure obligations regarding mold.

In Texas, according to a November, 2001 story in "Realtor" magazine, "The [mold] cases got so thick earlier this year that insurance companies, in the early part of the fall, withdrew from the homeowners insurance market there until the state's insurance commission stepped in. 'The insurance companies have since calmed down, and are waiting for the commissioner to develop rulemaking on the issue,' said an attorney with the Texas Association of Realtors."

In Fairfield, an elementary school will be razed after it was soaked from a leaking roof. The mold outran the efforts, and money needed, to purge the building of contamination.

A publisher of legal litigation reports, Mealey Publications and Conferences Group, Inc., of Pennsylvania, has found it necessary to publish a mold report monthly, separate from its construction litigation reporting, which itself comprises over 35,000 documents.

### **MOLD IS HUGE**

Even cursory research regarding mold, mildew or moisture problems quickly turns up hundreds of pages on the subject – many with frightening headlines about "toxic" mold and the associated health problems. After winnowing through them, discarding what smacks of "junk science" or hysteria or opportunism, there is still a trove of material documenting the problems of mold in residential and commercial buildings.

Mold is ubiquitous, and for the most part, harmless. In fact, if the fungus family did not exist, life on earth as we know it would be impossible. The vital functions molds perform, such as the breakdown and recycling of organic material, are ecologically necessary. And what kind of world would it be without bread, beer, wine, and cheese, all products of mold-induced fermentation? But on the other hand, out-of-place mold is responsible for musty basements, mildew on fabric and wallpaper, sour-smelling carpet, and stained grout. These visible signs of mold are also a high predictor of invisible mold, which may be trapped under flooring, or in structural members of the building. This is where the vital functions mold perform become dangerous. The cellulose in wood and insulation, the paper backing of drywall, and other organic materials, are fodder for mold. And if these unpleasant and unesthetic conditions are not enough, their presence may be indicators that a potential health hazard exists. It is an irony that modern building technology and energy-efficient construction may be contributing to that hazard. To grow, mold needs moisture. Sealing buildings to conserve energy prevents the free flow of air that helps to dry out the moisture found in most buildings. A building with trapped moisture is analogous to a bathroom that isn't ventilated; mold grows.

Sensational stories of "killer mold" notwithstanding, even lower levels of mold infestation can cause health issues. Sensitive individuals can develop rashes, headaches, chronic sinusitis, or asthma. Claims have been made that the childhood "epidemic" of asthma is partly mold-related. Fortunately, there are simple solutions to most mold problems in buildings.

## **KEEP IT OUT OR DRY IT OUT**

Most mold situations respond well to cleansing and thorough drying. Increasing ventilation in susceptible places, such as kitchens and baths, is a great help. One source of moisture, however, will continue to add moisture until it is prevented from doing so. That is the concrete slab in most basements. If you have experienced any of the above mold indicators in your home, or if you notice efflorescence (a powdering or chalky appearance) of your concrete floor or walls, then moisture is clearly moving into your home or building through the slab. Concrete is porous, which enables moisture to move through it. A new concrete floor is 12-15% moisture. When concrete cures, water creates a network of capillaries, which allow in liquid water and water vapor. The capillary network can even draw groundwater from several feet away from the foundation. This water vapor moves from the area of greater saturation, the slab, to the area of less saturation, the air in the home. Water seeping through the concrete can amount to more than the moisture from showering and cooking combined.

In many cases, previously dry basements have become damp as a result of stress cracks from settling, or footing drains silting up or breaking. When this happens, the slower drainage increases the capillary water seepage. The moisture migration increases in intensity, along with the problems it causes.

Concrete waterproofing is a sensible solution. To prevent this moisture migration, the slab must be sealed. Paints, tars and other membranes can degrade, and need re-application. This is untenable for many commercial and industrial buildings, and equally unsatisfactory for homeowners. Our company, Jason Robert's, Inc., specializes in concrete sealers, which include a sealer called "Vapor Lok." "Vapor Lok" is a modified silicate solution used on concrete surfaces to create an impervious moisture barrier. It virtually eliminates vapor transmissions. While it is technologically advanced, it is odorless, emits no vapors itself, and helps prevent shrinking and cracking in concrete. "Vapor Lok" is a great breakthrough in preventing the moisture vapor emissions in buildings that lead to health and esthetic problems, and can cause degradation of building and decorating materials. It is an economical solution to a potentially expensive and hazardous situation, the growth of mold.



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