China Cooperating With U.S. Over Drywall Scandal

BEIJING (AP) — China is helping American officials investigate reports of contaminated Chinese drywall after thousands of American homeowners complained the building material made them sick or damaged their houses, a top U.S. safety official said Monday.

Consumer Products Safety Commission Chairman Inez Tenenbaum said that her Chinese counterparts have provided technical help and are working with the U.S. to determine the cause of the problem.

"We are greatly appreciative," Tenenbaum said after finishing up six days of talks with officials from Beijing's product safety watchdog, the Administration of Quality Supervision Inspection and Quarantine. She didn't give specific details of the cooperation.

Tenenbaum also called on Chinese drywall companies "to examine carefully their responsibilities to U.S. consumers who are suffering from problems in their homes and to do what is fair and just in each case if their products are involved."

The costs to homeowners could be in the billions of dollars, according to some estimates, and homeowners have struggled to get help from insurers or relief from mortgage payments on homes that are in some cases uninhabitable.

American construction companies imported the drywall, also known as wallboard or gypsum board, at the height of the housing boom, when building materials were in short supply. The drywall apparently causes a chemical reaction that releases fumes that reek like rotten eggs and grow worse with heat and humidity.

U.S. homeowners blame the drywall for health woes such as itchy eyes and skin, difficulty breathing, persistent coughing and bloody noses as well as corrosion of electrical wiring and home appliances.

Tests of Chinese drywall by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have found sulfur and two organic compounds associated with acrylic paint — compounds not found in samples of American-made drywall. The EPA report did not draw any conclusions about health risks or whether the boards could be damaging wiring in homes.

Since late last year, the agency has received more than 1,300 complaints, with the majority from Florida and Louisiana. The drywall was imported primarily between 2004 and 2008 when home construction was booming and supplies tight. It has also been used in homes rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina.

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