

FIRE SAFETY

New Fire Safety Code Provides Less Protection

By Jerry R. Harke
For News USA

(NU) - Families and businesses across the nation may find they have less protection from fires as a result of ongoing building code revisions. Here's why:

Until 2000, the Southeast, Northeast and West had separate organizations that created building codes for those regions. Recently, the three regions combined in order to create one building code for the entire country.

This has resulted in less protection from fire in some cities and states where the old codes provided more protection.

The problem with the new code involves fire walls. Traditionally, fire walls have been rated in terms of "hours," which means that the product has passed a test called a one-hour, two-hour, three-hour or four-hour test.

Some materials, like concrete masonry, endure the entire test with no failure using only one wall panel. Other materials get by with the same rating by passing the test using two wall panels for different parts of the standardized test. This means that these products are allowed to have a fire rating without showing the same protection as concrete masonry fire walls.

Whether a product passes the test with one wall or gets a rating with less rigorous testing involving two walls is not general public knowledge.

In the Southeast, the old codes required all fire walls to have a

four-hour rating. But the newer standard requires a four-hour rating only for buildings considered to be "high hazards." Fire walls for buildings where large groups of people gather or where businesses, schools or day-care facilities are located now require only a three-hour rating when constructed of noncombustible materials or large wooden timbers. Additionally, the new code requires only a two-hour fire wall for these facilities when wood studs are used.

In the Northeast, the old codes required all fire walls to be constructed of noncombustible materials. Yet the new standard allows fire walls to be built of combustible materials for buildings using wood studs. It is even more critical that these walls stop the spread of fire since wood studs are combustible. Yet the new codes allow these walls to be built of combustible materials.

Since some requirements in the old codes are more stringent than in the new standard, this means the problem is now left up to state authorities to improve fire walls. Some, like North Carolina, already have required all fire walls be constructed of masonry, concrete, or any approved noncombustible material. Further, they have mandated that all fire walls must pass the entire standardized fire-resistance test by using only one wall panel instead of allowing two.

Concerned citizens can contact their elected representatives about this at www.ncma.org/fire.

Jerry R. Harke is a spokesman for the National Concrete Masonry Association.

**Guest
Commentary**