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Plastics Industry Still Shouting “Fire” At Its Own Peril

The foam insulation industry’s united stand against code changes could backfire in the marketplace.

By Alex Wilson

As EBN reported in January 2013 ([Getting Flame Retardants Out of Foam Insulation](#)), a group of environmentally concerned and health-conscious architects, builders, chemists, and others (including BuildingGreen, Inc.) has been working to amend the International Code Council’s Residential Building Code to allow foam insulation not treated with flame retardants to be used in locations where thermal barriers provide adequate protection.

It’s hard to see the need for these toxic chemicals when foam insulation is installed outside a concrete foundation and then buried, for example.

Why change the code?

The goal of this initiative has been to reduce the use of toxic halogenated flame retardants, including HBCD (hexabromocyclododecane), which has now been formally added to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants. The inclusion of HBCD was ratified at the 2013 meeting of the Stockholm Convention, which ended May 10, so it becomes the 23rd chemical to be banned internationally (though there is a five-year exemption for HBCD uses in foam insulation).

The code-change proposal failed at the International Code Council’s (ICC) Dallas hearings in April 2013. It was voted down 8–3 by committee and then failed 52–37 in a floor vote. That wasn’t too surprising; the ICC is a conservative body that adopts change very slowly. In fact, those involved with



Manufacturers of mineral wool, such as this product being installed at the Whistler Ski Resort in British Columbia, could come out winners with the recent failure of an amendment to ease requirements for flame retardants in foam insulation.

the Safer Insulation effort were relatively pleased with the level of interest in the proposal and the support it received.

What is surprising to me is how actively the foam insulation industry lobbied against the proposed code change.

United industry opposition

In fact, five different foam insulation trade associations—the Center for the Polyurethanes Industry, the EPS Industry Alliance, the Extruded Polystyrene Foam Association, the Polyisocyanurate Insulation Manufacturers Association, and the Spray Polyurethane Foam Alliance—went so far as to launch a new coalition to fight the proposed changes.

The newly created [Energy Efficient Foam Coalition](#), which operates under the American Chemistry Council umbrella, actively opposed the change, even though it would have given foam insulation manufacturers greater flexibility in producing and marketing a flame-retardant-free product for applications where other means of fire safety could be assured. Instead of supporting needed updates to flawed regulations, and allowing market forces to guide product development, the industry dug in its heels.

Specifiers may choose to avoid foam insulation altogether

What the industry may not appreciate is that there is growing concern about the chemicals we are exposing ourselves and our children to, and designers and builders will increasingly vote with their specifications—and their wallets.

More and more architecture firms and contractors are actively seeking out alternative materials that do not require flame retardants, such as mineral wool boardstock. North America’s leading manufacturer of mineral wool, Roxul, is [actively marketing two new rigid mineral wool boardstock products](#). I will not be at all surprised to see foam insulation materials—XPS, EPS, polyiso, and SPF—lose market share over the next few years due to these concerns.

By successfully fighting off the code-change proposal, the foam insulation industry may well be inflicting significant harm to itself—which is too bad, as we need these products to achieve energy conservation goals.

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IMAGE CREDITS:

1. Photo: Graham Finch, RDH

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