Making a Mountain Out of a Moldhill?

As with most simple questions, a range of answers greeted AWCI's Construction Dimensions when we canvassed 20 contractors for their take on mold as an issue, particularly with reference to drywall. There were those who said it was nothing more than the next big cash cow for lawyers, and others who were earnestly taking steps to handle the very real problem that mold presents. And rather typically, they are probably all right, but maybe some are more right than others when it comes to predicting which way the wind will turn and deciding on the best course of action.

The first basic reality is that most contractors (80 percent of those asked) rarely seem to encounter mold. Phrases like "an absolute rarity" and "once in 40 years" give the idea that running into a mold problem on a job site is as likely as winning the Lotto, but when one Canadian contractor clarified that he meant he had not been called back for any mold, then one can guess that the definition of "no mold" has wiggle room for some contractors.

Perhaps this loose definition of "mold problem" grows out of a reluctance to admit to someone else's goof being one's own—general contractors asking contractors to install drywall before the roof was fully in place or the structure had been fully dried in—the driver for GC's being sticking to the schedule and ultimately, money. It is questionable, of course, how much money is saved, given the cost of mold remediation. But if drywall contractors are forced into this position, it is understandable that they would be reluctant to admit that mold was an issue at a time when mold is no longer just something that happens and is corrected, but something that is involving increasing amounts of finger pointing and legal fees.

As several contractors pointed out, in the old days (a few years back) mold had an obvious
cause (water intrusion because the GC is in a rush) and an obvious solution: Jump on the mold fast enough with a bleach-and-water solution, maybe following up with some Kilz to stop the mold from returning.

If the wallboard was damaged by repeated water exposure and the mold well established, you’d cut out the moldy components and replace them. It was a simple solution.

Most contractors reported that the GCs generally willingly or unwillingly paid for the removal and replacement (in one case, the owner’s insurance company did because he was the one who gave the go-ahead just before a freak storm dumped inches of heavy, wet snow on a building with no roof and plenty of drywall installed).

As an Illinois contractor points out, “For decades mold has been no big deal—we would be the responsible party and remedy it. We can’t do this now because of
the liability. So we make our GCs take the responsibility of cutting it out and giving us the go-ahead that it is cleaned up and ready to go.”

One contractor from Rhode Island still jumps in and handles the problem: “Ten years ago we used to use bleach during the early stages, but it seems like an inappropriate solution now, as we are not technically skilled as biologists to know whether this is adequate. Some people try to put Kilz and all kinds of paint and goop on mold to kill it, but I think it’s a bad approach. We are a big company and can’t afford the risk. With all that we are hearing about moldy buildings and black mold, we just cut it out rather than be left holding the bag, usually at our cost.”

**High Tech Mold, Low-Tech Lawyers**

What changed? One thing is the whole subject of mold has gone high tech as our understanding of its effects on human health has increased. It is no longer acceptable to go in and dig out the critters if they have been allowed to colonize—it’s the mold busters one has to call. Explains one drywall sub from the Golden State, “There is no other option than to go to a high level of care and protection of the workers doing the removal, just as if one is removing asbestos, with proper respiratory training, proper equipment and medical follow-up of the workers.

“We could make money as a specialized remediation company, of course,” he adds, “but you have to work too hard to make it, and that leads to stress and too much demand on the workers, which leads to a greater likelihood of turnover and accidents. I’ve been in the business of safety 30 years and was in the front end of dealing with the asbestos issue. It seems that people are getting the message on mold a whole lot quicker than they did with asbestos, but where I see us running into difficulty is if subs think they can accommodate the GC by removing mold when it is at the level of removal that requires respiratory protection and their people are not qualified. It is a very complicated and cumbersome process to remove mold correctly.”

Lawyers are another change, obviously. They look for any weak link and, seeing a raised awareness in the general public
about the ill-effects of mold, and counting on a mad-dog media to fan the flames, act like arsonists in a building. So insist a quarter of those canvassed, and they wouldn’t be saying there was a fire unless they saw some smoke.

An Illinois contractor says, “Mold hasn’t been increasing of late, but awareness is increasing, so if any moisture gets into a job, everybody starts freaking out about it and it has to be dealt with. As long as the material wasn’t wet and wicking up, they didn’t care a whole lot. Now, if the floor is wet and the drywall material isn’t, they’ll have mold concerns. Claims and publicity about it is what has increased attention on it.

“Mold just was not an issue for the 20 years I have been in the industry, but in the last year, it has become a real big deal because the asbestos suits have all run their course, and now the lawyers need something else to go after, such as mold and EIFS.”

Mountain of Moldhill?

So do we have a problem, Houston? As reported earlier, 80 percent of those surveyed thought not. “I don’t think mold is as prevalent as it is portrayed,” says a Floridian who has not experienced any problems with mold.

The contractor from Illinois adds, “20 percent of the 500 houses we work on each year have what is now referred to as a ‘mold problem.’ We don’t want to go through these mold abatement classes they are starting up around us; it’s easiest for us to make the GC responsible.”

A Georgian reports that water intrusion occurs in about 2 percent of the buildings his company works on, and in those, mold develops about 20 percent of the time.

One Indiana contractor says “fewer than 5 percent of houses are affected by mold” and another says “a small percentage have mold.”

A Manitoban reports about 2 percent are affected.

One contractor from an Eastern state, however, sees “mold in 90 percent of our jobs, if you include even the smallest of
areas affected. It absolutely impacts our bottom line, because the paperwork to get the GC to pay is often more trouble than it’s worth, so we just go ahead and replace the moldy areas. It’s better than get into a pissing match.”

Mold exists in varying degrees in different areas, obviously, and as an Oregonian points out, “Mold spores are in the air and very little wood arriving on the sites even comes up to construction standards for mold content.” But changing perceptions, regulations and lawyers have thrown the spotlight on this lowly organism and turned it from “something to handle” into “something to worry about and cover your butt over.”

The barometer used to be “Does it not look right?,” according to a Nevadan, in talking about how mold was dealt with. “If not, they would replace it. Now they are making some other judgments.” In doing so, perhaps we have a raising of standards, an approach that several contractors are taking.

**Holding the Line**

With lawyers circling the wagons, we have more than the cost of the replacement involved today, of course. So what is a contractor to do?

A Californian reports, “We’ve had a couple of occurrences of mold from water intrusion as a result of roof drains not being sealed tightly. The GC demanded we remove the drywall. We asked, ‘Who is paying for it!’ and that argument went through the process for a while, by which time the mold was well established. Eventually drywall crews pulled it out.

“The way we handle the problem now is we tell the GC that he has three days maximum to authorize us to remove the moldy elements, after which it becomes his problem. They absolutely pay for it and it absolutely is fixed rapidly now, as we are careful to document the problem and notify the architect and GC very clearly—including all the documentation from the EPA and the health department detailing what one can expect when mold is not dealt with properly.

“It’s a successful strategy when you are
consistent, persistent and clear enough with your communications and you hold your ground. We've noticed that GCs have become increasingly smart about when to install drywall and how to protect buildings from water intrusion. If we have mold now, it is because someone has failed to do his job.”

An Alabaman takes a similar hard-nosed approach: “We make a job run by the specs and warranties from the manufacturer. We send the GC a letter saying that if he wants us to break warranty and the specifications of the job, he will do so in writing. It’s hard to buck that position.”

**Training Always Works**

“Another effective step is training crews on how to identify mold and water intrusion,” continues the Alabaman, “so it is not just left up to a project manager or superintendent to recognize a problem.”

A Rhode Island contractor is of the same mind: “I have been on a campaign for mold for the last six months, ever since the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International first started talking about this. I’ve reproduced the handout and as many articles as I can find for all our key players so they understand more how serious this is. AWCI has put out a mold manual, and I have started an in-house education program on how to handle mold. Georgia Pacific is coming out with a new product line of mold-resistant material, and next Monday, USG is coming up to educate our company on how to handle mold in buildings and drywall. We are looking for professional solutions to the problem. I’ve seeing in contracts of late that we are responsible under the terms or conditions of the contract for any mold we may have created in the building.”

“The emphasis that is being placed on mold is legitimate,” a Colorado contractor figures, “as it is an issue that has been causing health hazards that we have been unaware of until recently. Sure, I am concerned that it may just be the next asbestos gravy train for lawyers, but I also think there is a reason to be concerned. I have always felt that when things are discovered and people react to it in a professional way, that is the way things run best. I get real upset when others decide to make a bigger issue out of it. Things happen, we learn as we go, and what you do to rectify the problems is what is most important.”

A Californian feels “it will be another two years before the proper construction process is clarified to ensure no mold.
that point, the individual contractor’s approach to mold will become automatic and will no longer be his to deal with, ‘so don’t even talk to us about it.’

So maybe the way to view this business of mold is as a molehill that turned out to be a hill, and which some folks are trying to make into a mountain for their own ends. Whatever the perception of it, the technology for avoiding it or dealing with it is simple, and focusing on that is the best way to get to the top.

As a postscript, about 20 percent of the drywall contractors with whom this writer contacted for this article had quit doing drywall either because they could not find any qualified hangers who could a) speak English and b) turn up to the job on time, or because they could not compete against the underbidding, cutting corners, trunk-slamming brigade. The face of the drywall business is changing, it seems.

About the Author
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