"WACHUWANNANO"

Q & A

This question and answer feature addresses questions from readers on technical aspects of the wall and ceiling industry. Through this column, AWCI’s Technical Staff is available to be your personal consulting firm to answer your specific technical questions. If you need more information or more details to help you do your job better, just tell us WACHUWANNANO and we’ll get back to you in an upcoming issue.

“Q:” My crew just installed and advised me that they ran into what they think is asbestos on a remodel job we’re doing. What should I do now?

“A:” You’re not alone. The EPA estimates that asbestos is present in 20% of all US commercial structures and 35% of schools, so many contractors are in the same boat. Asbestos was used extensively in our industry until 1978 for thermal insulation, soundproofing and fireproofing. Assuming your shop is not certified nor interested in performing the abatement work, following are some general guidelines for remodeling contractors in your precarious position to follow:

First, determine if the suspected asbestos containing materials (ACMs) are friable or non-friable, that is, can they be crumbled or reduced to powder by hand pressure, causing them to emit fibers into the atmosphere? Non-friable ACMs are products in which asbestos fibers are bound together into some form and cannot escape under typical product conditions. If the ACMs are in good condition—not broken, abraded, torn, scuffed, chipped, etc.—and if, as a result of your work, they will not be sanded, damaged or otherwise handled in such a fashion that could cause release of asbestos fibers, nonfriable materials should not cause you, your employees or the property owner undue concern. Just tell your employees not to disturb such materials (and document it).

Second, if you have material in a generally friable condition, inform the property owner of the suspected presence of asbestos containing materials. The owner should then be responsible for sample testing by an accredited testing laboratory. A contractor who has not received training in sample taking can serve as a source of information for firms that can take the proper tests. (This procedure could be marked up as an “extra” on many jobs).

Third, if the lab confirms friable ACMs, explain to the owner that abatement work is performed by specialized firms with which the owner will have to contract. At this point, you may want to consider subcontracting the work and issuing a change order to your own contract. Check with your attorney on this.

Work cooperatively with the asbestos abatement contractor to coordinate safe remodeling activities and to minimize potential scheduling or other job-site problems surrounding the abatement activities. Remember that abatement can refer to both encapsulation and physical removal. The testing lab will likely return to certify that the site is “safe” again following the abatement contractor’s work.

Note: before bidding any remodeling job, try to determine whether any abatement activities have already been performed on your job site. Always make a careful, detailed site inspection prior to bidding because surprises can cause expensive job schedule changes. Save your notes and photos. Even if no ACMs are found, avoid giving this information to the owner.

Your contract with the owner should contain language that: (1) releases you from performing asbestos abatement work; (2) allows you to suspend work until the owner can certify that conditions are safe; (3) extends the contract to provide sufficient time to finish the project; and (4) allows you to rescind the contractor delay the start or continuation of work if ACM is discovered before or after work has begun.

Above all, don’t fall into the trap.

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of doing some “unofficial” abatement work “on the side” for the owner. The owner is ultimately responsible for deciding how to handle any asbestos found on his property, retaining a consultant and/or a contractor, and for compliance with all applicable EPA rules and regulations.

Many remodeling contractors are sued annually for negligently handling ACM. You will find no legal defense in the fact that you were unable to recognize a building material as containing asbestos. Asbestos is the largest source of product liability legislation in US history, and you don’t want to become party to any lawsuits; your insurance probably specifically excludes any asbestos coverage.

AWCI offers a wide selection of educational materials dealing with asbestos abatement techniques and procedures, including assorted technical manuals, EPA guidelines and video training tapes. All materials are currently significantly discounted.

For additional information on these and other useful learning tools, call AWCI’s Technical/Membership Services Department at (703) 684-2924.