

Treated lumber aims to fight termites, mold

by Roger Showley

If green is the color of choice for environmentalists, blue may become the favored color for lawsuit-averse builders.

The product that might set the trend is BluWood, a preservative applied to lumber to reduce the incidence of mold and damage from termites.

COAT OF ARMOR - BluWood treatment of this stairway is designed to reduce or eliminate the threat of mold and termite damage. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. And it's dyed blue partially because it's the inventor's favorite color.

"It came about because we wanted to be able to know the wood was treated," said Charles Mirando, 65, whose company, WoodSmart Solutions Inc. in Orlando, Fla., developed BluWood.

Green was out because of bad publicity surrounding green-tinted, pressure-treated lumber that contains arsenic.

"I have a blue Hummer," Mirando added.

In recent years, juries have awarded millions of dollars in damages to homeowners because of construction defects, some of which led to water damage, mold and health problems for occupants.

Mirando, who in 1998 sold a previous company manufacturing specialty coatings, said he had his chemists research ways to protect lumber in the home.

"I had them begin development and they created the formula," he said. "In 2001, we began testing the product and entered the market in late 2002. We've proceeded on it since."

He estimated that about 500 million board feet of lumber have been treated with BluWood so far.

In San Diego, custom homes have been built with BluWood, the latest a remodel of a doctor's house, where blue timber is going up alongside the remaining framework. One of the workers scrawled a greeting across one beam, "Please paint me blue - Papa Smurf," while another was dabbing some of the blue goo onto end cuts.

The doctor, who asked that his name and address not be published, said in an e-mail that he had had unsatisfactory results from fumigation for termites and was concerned about the possibility that mold could affect his children's health.

"Given this, it seemed like a fairly easy decision to make," he said.

Pascal Cabeen, superintendent for the project's general contractor, Beacham Construction Inc., said this was his first experience with BluWood.

"It's definitely a step in the right direction," he said, "because of mold and termite resistance - those are a few of the things we battle against."

BluWood adds between \$1 and \$1.50 per square foot to the cost of a home or about 10 percent to the lumber bill. But that is considered cheap insurance against mold and termites, damage from which can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Doug Mulvey, who built a custom house in Santa Luz, Calif., using BluWood, said 70 percent of his clients want some additional protection against mold and termites.

"It's surprising how many of our clients have allergies and health concerns," he said. "This just seems to be the best way to deal with part of it."

The BluWood treatment involves spraying lumber with an infusion film that controls moisture absorption and a borate preservative that protects against rot and termites. The product is listed in the GreenSpec directory of environmentally safe products, published by BuildingGreen Inc. in Denver

But the material isn't something trusted to on-site carpenters and framers for application. Instead, the lumber is treated at licensed factories around the country, and then is shipped to construction sites.

Colton, Calif., contractor Steve Conboy, a framer all his life, said lumber typically comes out of areas with a wet climate, such as the Pacific Northwest, and often harbors mold that surfaces years later - resulting in lawsuits against contractors, designers and anyone else associated with the construction.

So far, custom builders have shown the most interest in using BluWood.

"We're just now starting to penetrate the market to where production builders are talking to us," he said.

Jeff Perkins of Manley Builders, the framer on the San Diego doctor's house, said he hopes BluWood becomes the product of choice of future clients.

"I'm hoping this product helps reduce litigation down the road," he said.

Bryan M. Garrie, an attorney with the firm Epstein Grinnell & Howell that specializes in construction-defect lawsuits, said BluWood is but the latest product rolled out to prevent dry rot, termites and mold.

"It is a nice way to protect the wood from the elements," he said.

But he raised questions about the value of the BluWood warranty and the need for such wood treatments.

"Why not spend the extra time and effort to build the building correctly as opposed to putting on these prophylactic backstops within the wall system that won't stop the problem from the beginning," he said.

He said general contractors should do a more thorough job monitoring their subcontractors so that leaks do not occur.

As for the BluWood warranty, he noted that the details exempt the manufacturer from liability if water intrusion is found.

"The only reason you'd want to protect the wood within the framed structure is if water gets to it," he said. "And the only way water can get to it is there's a breach in the system. That breach in the system is specifically excluded by the warranty."

He also noted that the warranty, while labeled as a lifetime guarantee, only lasts for 30 years for the original owner and no more than 10 years for a subsequent owner within the 30-year-period, as long as those owners pay a \$300 warranty renewal fee. The warranty also does not apply to remodels where existing wood remains alongside BluWood.

Mirando said he might revise the warranty to extend the full warranty period to subsequent owners and defended the exclusions in coverage to protect his company when BluWood homes are not built or maintained properly.

Dan Casell, a mortgage broker who built a speculative home with BluWood in Del Mar, Calif., said he has read enough about the product to stand by it. In his own 3-year-old home in nearby Encinitas, he said he recently discovered mold infestation and plans to treat it with BluWood.

"I just feel that because I have built enough homes, there are just too many things that can go wrong in building one to make it so perfect you can eat off the plate, so to speak," he said.

Carlos Villa, service manager for Western Exterminator Co., said he welcomed new products to combat termites but said plenty of business remains to deal with homes lacking such protection.

"They don't want to live with bugs, and there are plenty," he said. "The business is definitely there."

Garrie said besides BluWood, he has noticed another product, paperless drywall from Georgia Pacific, that also claims to guard against mold and termites, and he recommended its use instead of or in addition to BluWood.

Leo Bissonnette, general manager for Georgia Pacific's gypsum division, said the product, DensArmor Plus, replaces paper with a fiberglass-mat facing. It was introduced at the International Builders Show in Orlando last year and is being widely distributed to home-improvement stores.

"I think what the homeowner is looking for is an expectation that when I buy a house, it'll be mold-free and not have a problem," he said.

With new homes typically including three and four bathrooms and having ventilation not as complete as in older homes, he said there is more moisture present and a greater chance for mold to grow.

"I just think people are concerned and don't want to find out five years down the road that they have a mold problem and have to disclose it when they sell the house and discover the property is not worth as much as what they originally paid for it."

He said the paperless drywall costs about 66 cents per square foot of a home more than standard drywall, about \$1,600 for a 2,500-square-foot house. The company hopes that it will eventually replace all standard paper-faced drywall.

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