

No Time to Waste

A Mold Remediation. A Timeline of Aggravation

by Peter Sierck

A couple and their teenage children were ready for a two month vacation to Europe, but not for the mold they discovered in their house prior to their departure. The problem seemed to be a minor one, but a source for the mold had not yet been found by contractors when the family boarded the plane. When they returned, would their home be the paradise they had left?

Timeline: one month prior to departure.

The Santa Monica Mountains provide a breathtaking view of the greater Los Angeles area. Beautiful, large homes are constructed here, hugging the slopes of this prime real estate area. Five years ago, a famous trial lawyer bought his dream home for himself and his family here. At that time, California was in a period of drought, between El Nino conditions.

It does not normally rain a lot in Southern California but when it rains, it pours. This past winter was a particularly wet one and, during the rains, the homeowner noticed that water pooled on the decks and next to the house. The water always disappeared, so the owners were not overly concerned. Then in April, the maid complained about an odor and some spots on the exterior wall in her quarters downstairs. The son also noticed some spots on the exterior wall of his bedroom. The homeowner decided to call a mold inspector.

The homeowner refused an inspection of the entire home, so the testing and inspection were limited to the downstairs areas of concern. The inspector conducted moisture measurements on the exterior wall of the son's bedroom, the maid's room and at the drywall along the retaining wall. The walls measured wet (80 to 100 on the relative scale) up to 2 feet high and efflorescence was present on the slab along the retaining wall. One of the decks was located above the bedrooms. Elevated moisture levels were also detected in one area on each of the bedroom ceilings. No visible mold growth was observed on the ceiling.

The air-sampling data reflected similar indoor spore levels when compared to the outside reference samples. The surface samples collected from the exterior wall and the drywall along the retaining wall yielded active growth of penicillium and aspergillus. The report recommended destructive testing for further evaluation of the ceiling areas that still showed no visible damage. The report also stated that the upstairs areas of the home had not been inspected.

At the same time, the family was planning for a two



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month trip to Europe with their three teenage children. This made the timing for a mold remediation very inconvenient. When the builder was contacted, the homeowner requested that the remediation be performed and completed during their absence. The luggage was packed and the family departed for their exciting journey.

Timeline: two months until homeowners' return and counting.

The builder contacted a remediation company that performed a mold remediation on the exterior and retaining walls, leaving visible damage. No destructive testing was performed on the ceilings, as recommended in the inspector's report. The builder's customer care representative was not in a hurry to get the remediation completed, since the homeowners were out of town for two months. In fact, a month passed before the mold inspector was called back to perform a post-mold remediation clearance testing.

Timeline: one month and counting.

The post-remediation air sampling yielded comparable levels in the containments when compared to the outside reference samples. No areas of visible mold growth were present in the remediation areas, but a strong musty odor was still noticed during the visual

inspection in the downstairs bedrooms. The mold inspector did not pass the site for reconstruction and recommended further evaluation through destructive testing. A site meeting between the builder, the remediation contractor and the mold inspector was scheduled for the next day.

The meeting took place in the breakfast area of the kitchen. The builder and the remediation contractor resisted the recommended approach and a discussion ensued at the site. The mold inspector would not change his opinion and insisted on destructive testing.

Then, during the meeting they noticed stains on the ceiling of the kitchen. The area did not measure wet, but the mold inspector took a surface sample. The sample yielded active aspergillus growth. That changed everything. The next report recommended destructive testing on the kitchen ceiling and on the ceilings in the downstairs bedrooms under the family room deck.

Timeline: three weeks and counting.

Containments were erected and the inspection of the opened areas revealed mold growth in the ceiling cavities under the decks. The conclusion was that the decks were leaking around the drains and additional remediation would be necessary. The decks overhang the kitchen and downstairs bedrooms. All parties involved were under tremendous pressure by this point. What would the homeowners do when they found their dream home littered with containments and opened ceilings? Yet no one could reach them to find out.



With two months to do the job, the builder's representative was in no hurry to get the remediation complete—so mold growth hurried along without notice.



Not surprising from its location below a water-dripping deck, this ceiling measured wet at the first inspection; more surprising, it was not immediately remediated.

Timeline: ten days and counting.

The containments were erected and the countdown continued. All moldy materials were removed as fast as possible. The remediation and reconstruction of the interior needed to be finished by the time the homeowners returned. The decks needed to be water tested to insure proper drainage. Five days were left to complete the entire project including the reconstruction. The project called for double shifts.


Finally, the work areas were ready for testing. The site passed, no odor was detected, and it was ready for reconstruction.


Timeline: five days and counting.

Evaluation of the drainage system of the decks revealed that the drain connections had developed gaps and were clogged with leaves and debris. The drainage system for the retaining wall needed to be upgraded to handle the wet winters.

The reconstruction was still under way when the homeowners returned—and they could not believe what had happened during their absence.

Timeline: zero days left. And one week later, the reconstruction and painting was finished.

The hands of time stop for nothing—including mold. 

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