

## **Pests Woes Bedevil New Construction and Vacant Homes**

*By Douglas Stern, Managing Partner Stern Environmental Group*

The slowing U.S. economy coupled with stricter mortgage-lending criteria has dealt the real estate industry a one-two punch from which it is still struggling to recover. Houses and commercial buildings are sitting on the market longer before they sell. Many of these buildings, particularly new builds and foreclosures, may be vacant for months before a family or business moves in. Unfortunately, such prolonged vacancies encourage unwanted squatters to take up residence. Insects, rodents and other pests move in when humans move out. In vacant buildings their presence can go undetected for months, allowing these pests to become well established and creating serious problems for realtors and builders that can affect the sale of the property.

Owners expect a new home or commercial building to be in pristine condition and certainly pest-free. However, the very process of construction can leave a new building open to pest invasion. Building construction typically takes several months, although structure size, financial considerations and particularly weather conditions can lengthen that time considerably. Wooden structural components and wood framing can sit open to the elements for weeks or months. During construction, wood, gypsum board and fiberglass insulation absorb more moisture than air and sunlight wick away. It is not unusual for the structural components of a newly completed building to contain excess moisture that can persist over the next few years, often attracting insects that thrive in moist conditions.

Prolonged vacancy only exacerbates the problem. The real estate market is glutted with unsold homes. New home sales have reached a historic low, according to the National Association of Realtors. Nationwide, nearly a quarter of a million homes are in foreclosure, up 65% from last year, says research firm RealtyTrac, Inc. Homes left vacant due to foreclosure are often neglected and can easily fall into disrepair. Stagnant water collecting in backyard swimming pools, birdbaths and overflowing gutters creates an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes that can carry the potentially fatal disease West Nile Virus. Overgrown shrubbery crowding a building provides insects and rodents with easy access to the interior. Bats, rats, mice, bees, wasps, spiders and all manner of crawling insects may seek refuge in vacant homes and buildings. Left undisturbed, rapid reproduction rates can create major infestations in a matter of weeks.

Here are some of the more common pests to watch out for:

Wood, plaster, grain and fungus-eating beetles lay their eggs on damp wood, gypsum board or the paper backing on insulation. As larvae hatch, they may feed on the building materials themselves or eat the molds that grow on materials exposed to the weather. As structures dry out and the fungi die, these tiny beetles, less than 1/16 inch in length, will move through cracks and crevices into living areas.

Springtails, booklice and silverfish are small, whitish, almost transparent insects (1/16 to 1/2 inch long) that breed in damp conditions. They typically feed on damp, moldy wood

and paper. Silverfish particularly like starchy wallpaper paste. These insects often harbor behind brick veneers and stone facings or in damp basements and attics.

Long-horned beetles can be a problem in milled wood paneling. These multicolored beetles with long antennae lay their eggs in trees that are often milled for paneling. If the paneling isn't heat-cured before use in construction, larvae may still be present in the wood. When larvae mature two to three years later, the adult beetles chew oval exit holes they emerge from the paneling.

Termite infestations can threaten the structural dependability of a building. Termites cause \$5 billion in property damage a year, chomping their way through structural wood, flooring, carpeting and wallpaper. Difficult to detect, termites often remain undiscovered until damage is severe. Termites are attracted by moisture and construction debris left on new build sites. From there it's a short march to the new food source a building provides.

Powderpost beetles are another wood-chomping pest that can affect a building's structural integrity. The reddish-brown beetles lay their eggs in cracks in wood, including baseboards and floors. Named for the fine, powder-like dust their larvae leave behind as they tunnel through wood, powderpost beetles are second only to termites in their destructive capabilities.

Carpenter ants, large black ants ranging in size from 1/4 to 2/3 inch long, are also attracted by the damp wood debris common near construction sites. Building their nests in construction gaps and cavities, they chew long galleries into structural wood to expand their nests. Voracious tunnelers, their extensive galleries can undermine building structures.

Minute red clover mites can migrate from sod into a home through tiny cracks in the foundation or window frames. As they are crushed by home visitors, the mites leave unsightly red stains and smears on surfaces.

Wood cockroaches and large, hairy wolf spiders may seek refuge in homes built in wooded areas. In cities, cockroaches can be a serious problem in vacant buildings. Field and deer mice are common problems in new housing carved from farm fields or wooded areas. They can enter a home through cracks and crevices smaller than a dime. Chewing, feces and urine can contaminate and destroy cabinets and woodwork. In city settings, vacant homes can attract rats.

Vacant buildings may also harbor fleas, ticks and bed bugs from previous occupants. Although these insects feed on human or animal blood, they are capable of surviving for several months without a meal.

Realtors and buyers need to beware of potential insect and vermin infestations in new and vacant homes and buildings. A thorough inspection by a professional pest control company should be performed before a sale is finalized. Getting rid of a well-established pest colony or vermin population can be time-consuming and costly. A professional

cleaning service may need to be engaged to clean and disinfect the building before it can be safely occupied. Buyers will want to factor these expenses into their negotiations. Realtors should be aware of potential pest issues and know how to identify signs of problems. Proactive pest management can ensure that you don't lose a sale due to unexpected squatters.

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