

Mold Clearance Inspections: Buyer Beware!

By Jason Harris

So, you have a mold problem that has been addressed and you want to know if it is okay to move occupants back into the area...get a clearance inspection. But not from the company who did the work!

For the purpose of this article, post-abatement, post-remediation, and clearance are synonymous terms. Essentially, it means check the work after it has been done.

As a general rule, owners can solve a mold problem in-house if the total repair cost is \$500 or less, and/or the affected area is less than ten (10) square feet. Otherwise, the work should be done by a mold remediation company that is licensed and insured.

In either case, a clearance inspection should be done to verify the mold has been adequately removed prior to reconstruction. It will also satisfy disclosure requirements for buyers in the event the property is sold, and most tenant concerns. The clearance inspection will demonstrate your due diligence to have the problem handled properly in the event of a formal complaint or lawsuit.

The purpose of a mold clearance inspection is to provide a limited investigation report based on the abatement and remediation activity performed at the site by an independent mold abatement and remediation contractor.

A post remediation inspection, both visual and analytical, is performed to ensure a return to a pre-mold contaminated environment. The post remediation inspection is based on the following four criteria:

1. Absence of visible dust, debris and moisture within the containment area(s);
2. Absence of visible fungal growth within the containment area(s);
3. Moisture content of lumber and other construction materials are within normal limits inside the containment area(s); and
4. Balance of the airborne fungal spores found inside the containment area(s) when compared to fungal spores found outside the containment area(s), based on total spore count and/or hierarchy of spores detected.

If all four of these criteria are met, then the mold abatement and remediation efforts are considered to be acceptable (**PASS**) and no further abatement or remediation is recommended. If any of the four criteria are not met, then the mold abatement and remediation efforts are considered to be unacceptable (**FAIL**) and further abatement and/or remediation is recommended.

In the event the containment area fails inspection, a re-inspection is generally recommended. If so, the inspection company should be willing to perform the re-inspection at a lower price since there is less work involved with verifying the

recommendations have been implemented. It should also give the customer a level of confidence the inspection company's motivation is not to keep re-inspecting to generate additional revenue.

When a mold remediation contractor says they will do their own clearance testing there is a conflict of interest. Not all remediation projects require clearance testing, but some form of post-remediation verification should be performed and it should be done by someone working for the building owner, not for the contractor who did the work. Clearance testing services assure that the contractor has adequately cleaned the remediation work area to standard industry acceptance criteria.

The remediation company has a vested interest in passing any type of clearance inspection because it costs more time and money to continue working on your project if it fails inspection. So, they want to keep third parties away from the work being done so they can wrap up, get paid and move on. Any cost savings they are offering you to perform the clearance is already built into the cost of the repair either through the initial estimate or subsequent change orders.

By hiring a "Test Only" company, that means hiring one that only performs inspections, testing and consulting. This is an important distinction from a "Testing and Removal" company, and it is up to you as the buyer to know that distinction. Since the mold industry is self-regulated, it is a classical case of "Caveat Emptor: Let the Buyer Beware."

Remediation companies may offer "100% Guarantee Pass Clearance" or even low-or-no-cost post-abatement verifications. But think about it, it's like the proverbial fox guarding the hen house. Of course, the fox is going to assure nothing will happen to the hens under his watch. But if no one else is watching the fox, how do you know what's really going on?

Another analogy is the tobacco industry. For years, the tobacco companies denied any harmful affects of smoking cigarettes. They vehemently defended their position for decades until the statistics from the healthcare sector and the dreaded internal memos were discovered. Then it became obvious the tobacco industry was concerned with profit over consumer safety. Several class-action lawsuits and billions of dollars later, the tobacco companies are no longer credible when it comes to self-regulation.

Another example: smog testing for motor vehicle registration. Auto repair shops that offered both services use to recommend costly repairs to pass smog inspection. Later it was determined auto shops were padding their profits by abusing their authority when testing, repairing, and clearing the smog compliance of many vehicles. The state stepped in and regulated this practice which resulted in "Test Only" smog check centers.

This article is not a case for regulating the mold industry, but it is a reminder to use one company to inspect and a separate company to remediate. Now that you have been

educated there is a lesser likelihood of recurring problems, occupant health & safety can be optimized, and the legal aspects of the situation are addressed objectively.

The above article was written by Jason Harris of Harris Environmental. Harris Environmental offers fast, affordable results for owners and occupants concerned about the indoor environment of their structures. If you have questions about this article, feel free to send an email to HEnvironmental@yahoo.com or call (626) 487-3957 or visit them online at www.HEnvironmental.com.