

For Immediate Release

April 5, 2006

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Safety among reasons vinyl siding's popularity reaching new heights

The popularity of vinyl siding for exterior cladding of new and remodeled single-family homes in the United States is at its highest point in history.

According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, vinyl siding holds more market share than any other single type of cladding material in the country and nearly double the closest competitive material. In fact, census data shows vinyl siding has been the number one choice for new homes with sale prices up to \$300,000, and is second only to stucco for homes priced above \$300,000.

Despite its rising popularity with builders and homeowners, critics of the material, including some planners, have held on to perceptions that are either outdated or simply not true. The fact is that vinyl siding has come a long way since the "Tin Men" of the 1950s, both in terms of product quality and marketing sophistication.

"Over the past few decades, the vinyl siding industry has made multiple technological advances in terms of product consistency, color retention, durability, and profile alternatives," said Vinyl Siding Institute (VSI) President Jerry Y. Huntley. "The ASTM D3679 standard was introduced in 1979 and helped solidify the basic quality requirements for the industry. Today, more than 90 percent of the vinyl siding manufactured is third-party certified to meet that national standard."

One aspect of vinyl siding's primary material – rigid polyvinyl chloride (PVC) – that has never changed is its safety record regarding fire.

Underwriters Laboratories, Inc.® (UL) approves the use of vinyl siding in many of its fire rated assemblies, approving "solid vinyl siding mechanically secured over the outer layer to framing members in accordance with manufacturer's recommended installation details."

"In short, the UL listing means vinyl siding has been accepted as a product because it will not contribute to or assist in starting a fire on those rated assemblies," said Matt Dobson, VSI Code and Regulatory Director.

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There are three primary reasons why vinyl siding can take the heat – safely.

- High ignition temperature: Low ignitability is the first line of defense in a fire. All organic materials do ignite, but the higher the temperature a material has to reach before it ignites, the safer it is. PVC won't flash ignite until nearly 400°C and won't self-ignite until closer to 450°C. Those numbers are significantly higher than that of typical framing lumber.
- High Limited Oxygen Index: ASTM D2843 tests, according to research released by the Vinyl Institute, prove that rigid PVC's high Limited Oxygen Index (LOI) number means that it takes unusually high amounts of oxygen to burn and stay burning. Therefore, vinyl siding is easily extinguished, if it ever gets to the point that it burns at all.
- Low surface flammability: Results of the radiant panel test, ASTM E162, show PVC as one of the materials with the lowest flame spread rating, meaning it will not spread flame on its own.

“Planners, builders and homeowners who have witnessed a vinyl sided home damaged by fire could perceive the damaged siding as burned, when in fact it had merely melted,” Huntley said.

The laws of chemistry can prove vinyl products do not readily ignite and are inherently flame-retardant due to their chlorine base. In fact, most vinyl products will not continue to burn once a flame or heat source is removed.

In the unfortunate case of a home fire, the products of vinyl combustion have been proven to be no less safe than those produced by many other common materials, both natural and synthetic. When it burns, vinyl does release hydrogen chloride (HCl), but studies have shown that HCl does not incapacitate or become dangerous until it reaches concentrations much higher than those measured in fires.

Officials at VSI are unaware of any municipality that has imposed restrictions on vinyl siding or any other building material based on its fire safety properties.

“We've always understood our vinyl siding products are safe and secure,” Huntley said. “And when you consider organizations like the International Code Council's (ICC) code requirements for fire rated assemblies, now a city planner or planning commission anywhere in America can say with confidence that the facts side with safety.”

The Vinyl Siding Institute, Inc. is the Washington, DC based trade association for manufacturers of vinyl and polymeric siding and suppliers to the industry. VSI is the sponsor of the VSI Vinyl Siding Product Certification Program and the VSI Certified Installer Program.

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