

Alaska HomeWise: Ask a Builder
By Cold Climate Housing Research Center Staff

The "Ask a Builder" series is dedicated to answering some of the many questions Fairbanks residents have about building, energy and the many other parts of home life.

Recently I picked up some used foam to put on the outside of my house. I think it has been saturated with water because it feels very heavy. Is this a problem?

For years in Fairbanks it has been very common to see used rigid foam board advertised for sale, generally at quite reasonable prices. This foam usually comes out of large scale roofing retrofits on commercial, public, and military buildings. Often this foam is quite heavy because it is saturated with water. That is the reason it was removed in the first place. Potential buyers need to be aware that this type of foam can have significantly less value as insulation, depending on its moisture content. How much moisture a sheet of foam contains is difficult to determine, unless one can weigh it against a new sheet of an identical product. Consequently, people who are using this insulation over any building components that are susceptible to moisture damage, such as wood framing, are doing so at their own risk. Whether the foam is capable of fully drying out over time is unknown. If you are choosing to insulate around a foundation or under a gravel pad, the foam may prove cost effective if it is of the right density and dry. Keep in mind you are buying an older used product and its quality and performance compared to the same insulation when purchased new can be highly variable.

I just replaced my old wood stove. My stack is fairly old as well. Should I replace that too?

That is a case-dependent question. It's worth an inspection. You can do it yourself, to a certain degree, but if you have had any chimney fires, then I would consult a chimney sweep. If you are able to, go into your attic and take a look at the chimney pipe itself. Make sure it has the required amount of clearance between the chimney and the insulation. That's one of the big issues we see in the houses that burn down. The chimney pipes typically require two inches of air space around the chimney and someone will insulate right against the chimney pipe. After years of having the insulation or the wood constantly being exposed to heat, eventually the ignition point of the material drops and it takes a lot less to ignite it. One good, hot fire, or worse yet, a chimney fire can get that stuff going. So a good inspection is money and time well spent.

My shower makes a screeching sound when I turn it on. How can I get rid of this?

One source of a screaming shower is the showerhead. Buildup inside the head can clog it and cause that irritating sound. If you unscrew the head, and clean the parts inside, that might help. Other places to check for clogs are the faucets and diverters. These are the knob assemblies you turn to adjust the water or temperature. Also, the little valve that sends water up to your showerhead, instead of out the spout, can cause a screeching sound if it vibrates or if it's letting air into the line.

Finally, too much, or too little water pressure can cause a showerhead to squeal. Check to see if your water pressure falls within the standard residential range of 40 to 60 pounds per square inch.

Alaska HomeWise articles promote home awareness for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center (CCHRC). If you have a question, e-mail us at akhomewise@cchrc.org. You can also call the CCHRC at (907) 457-3454