

Rushing to Re-Occupy After Disaster – A Lesson For All

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In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, landlords and building owners have been rushing to get their tenants back in place, performing speedy removal and replacement of building materials damaged by the disasters. These activities, undertaken with the best of intentions, may result in the worst of consequences - return of mold growth and repetition of abatement.

Regardless of the approach of the abatement contractor, consultant, building owner or manager with respect to mold problems, there are universally accepted issues which are being passed-by in the name of quick response and saving money. This includes the quintessential, all-encompassing first rule of mold: "STOP THE WATER!"

In an effort to re-occupy damaged buildings from Fort Lauderdale to New Orleans, there has been a resounding rush to get contaminated materials out of the building so that tenants can return to work. However, it must not be forgotten that any remediation effort is doomed to failure if the source of moisture is not addressed first. Oddly, the greater New Orleans area has not seen a drop of rain since the passing of Hurricane Katrina. As such, many building managers have rushed to clean their buildings, remove and replace mold-contaminated drywall, carpet and other finishings, without thinking to address the water intrusion sources located in roofs, windows and walls, or to verify proper repairs. Unfortunately, this may result in tenants being disrupted yet again, when water intrusion returns, forcing a second abatement. This mistake should be a reminder to property managers everywhere, that speed is no match for calm, intelligent thought.

Similarly important is maintaining building continuity in older structures. Some building owners have used disaster repairs as an opportunity to tighten building envelopes or to replace costly building materials with cheaper substitutes. Mold is a newly defined problem, rare in older buildings, and only now becoming an issue, largely due to recent changes to building materials, construction and function. Care should be taken before replacing plaster with drywall, or adding insulation to formerly ventilated design. These changes often result in lowering of electric bills, but later result in drastic increases in mold-abatement costs that emerge when building design is changed without regard to possible effects such as condensation or trapping of water.

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