

OKLAHOMA CITY
More snow falling in southern Plains

More snow fell Sunday as part of a powerful storm blowing through Oklahoma and the southern Plains on the first weekend of spring. The National Weather Service said there was moderate to heavy snow across northeast Oklahoma, northwest Arkansas and southwest Missouri, with some places reporting 8 to 12 inches of snow.

BAGHDAD
Iraqi president demands recount

Iraq's president on Sunday called for a recount in this month's parliamentary elections, which have turned into a tight race between the prime minister and a secular rival amid accusations of fraud. The demand from President Jalal Talabani came a day after Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki appeared to back the idea by calling on the election commission overseeing the counting to quickly respond to requests from political blocs for a recount.

In other news

N.D. river crests: The crest of the Red River was met Sunday with more shrugs than white knuckles. The National Weather Service said the Red River crested Sunday afternoon at just under 37 feet.
BA strike: British Airways cabin crews walked off the job for a second day Sunday but the airline insisted the strike was having less impact than expected and said it was able to restore flights that had previously been canceled.
Israel rejects restrictions: Israel will not restrict construction in east Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday.

From wire reports

DRYWALL

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federal agencies for a year now, and it seems like a lot of them have been trying to slip out the door, like, the Environmental Protection Agency," said U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, who helped initiate the federal investigation last year.

"If anybody has been trying to help people, it's the Consumer Product Safety Commission. But I'm still a little concerned about the pace of the investigation, especially why it's taking so long to tell folks how to fix this stuff. Now, we have fraud artists out there duping people into paying money for fake fixes."

U.S. Rep. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, in February sponsored legislation proposing that repair and reconstruction payments on toxic drywall should not be taxable.

Posey said the response to Chinese drywall issues on the Treasure Coast is "unacceptable."

"The Consumer Product Safety Commission has indeed been very slow in releasing their findings and putting forward any recommendations that might give guidance to affected families," he said. "I find that to be disappointing."

From a national database provided to Scripps Howard News Service from the CPSC, about 166 Chinese drywall complaints originated from the Treasure Coast, including 53 from Indian River County, 90 from St. Lucie County and

23 from Martin County.

The health complaints on the Treasure Coast range from asthma, respiratory infections, double pneumonia, nosebleeds, elevated liver enzymes and headaches to complaints as serious as lung problems and cancer. According to the complaints, both young infants and the elderly have been hospitalized because of Chinese drywall.

The status of those complaints with the CPSC remains unknown.

CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson would not answer questions about how federal officials have investigated Chinese drywall complaints on the Treasure Coast. Wolfson did not provide information on when the agency plans to conclude its investigation or what recourse homeowners have with builders or insurance companies that have denied Chinese drywall damage claims.

The agency also isn't giving any guidelines on repair or reconstruction protocols for homeowners despite hundreds of Chinese drywall repair companies claiming to test and repair defective drywall.

"The government needs to step in here because they're the ones that allowed the product to come into this country," said Bradley Simons, who was forced to abandon his family's new Mercedes Home in Vero Lake Estates that was built using Chinese drywall. "They need to do something to help us

because we're just middle-class families. I can't afford to pay \$70,000 to get the house repaired, and why should I? That's not fair. The government failed us with this product."

Simons filed a complaint with the CPSC but he hasn't heard anything back from the commission.

On its Web site, the CPSC states the agency has received about 3,000 reports from residents in 37 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, who believe their health symptoms and the corrosion of metal components in their homes are related to drywall produced in China. More than 90 percent of those complaints are from Florida.

The Florida Department of Health has received more than 720 complaints. Agency spokeswoman Susan Smith said the agency does not "confirm" complaints, rather it records information related to the observations provided by the caller for reporting to the state surgeon general and Gov. Charlie Crist's office. The agency then instructs callers to report complaints to the CPSC.

"These people are abandoning their homes and losing their life's savings and there is no sense of urgency to jump in this both feet first by the federal government ... it just blows me away," said Thomas Martin, president of Americas Watchdog, a national advocacy group for consumer protection. "How does the governor

of Florida (Charlie Crist) meet with President Obama and not bring up Chinese drywall?"

In a prepared statement by e-mail, Crist's spokesman Sterling Ivey said the governor requested aid from Federal Emergency Management Agency. The request was denied by FEMA on March 12.

"He has not spoken to the president directly, but we continue to work with our congressional delegation and federal partners to assist all Floridians experiencing problems with Chinese drywall," Ivey said.

It's still unknown how future drywall imports will be handled by the CPSC and if Treasure Coast homeowners with Chinese drywall could receive financial assistance from the federal government in the form of local Community Development Block Grant program funds. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development spokeswoman Shantae Goodloe did not answer questions concerning Chinese drywall on the Treasure Coast.

In December, HUD gave permission to the Louisiana Recovery Authority and statewide local governments to use Community Development Block Grant money to assist Louisiana homeowners who have confirmed cases of Chinese drywall in their homes. The money will not be distributed until the CPSC releases protocols on how to properly test and repair damage.

Other agencies working with the CPSC include the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

When contacted about the status of their findings with the CPSC, some of those agencies said they were waiting on data from the commission to begin their own testing while others referred questions back to the CPSC.

"We're in the process of collecting data we've received from other agencies," said Bernadette Burden, spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. "Our only role in this is to help determine the potential health effects of the imported drywall ... we have not released preliminary information or a final report."

Burden estimated her agency has received 50 to 60 reports from the CPSC on Chinese drywall.

Ryan Dave from the federal Environmental Protection Agency referred questions back to the commission.

Nelson said homeowners deserve more of a response.

"Nearly 3,000 cases of tainted drywall in Florida and three dozen other states have been reported to the government and the number continues to grow," Nelson said. "The affected homeowners deserve to know the extent of any health threat and, what they can do to get the problem fixed so they can live in their own houses."

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