Media release

Fire engineer: Cladding replacement not sole solution

There are alternatives to full replacement of potentially flammable cladding on high-rise buildings, but insurers need to acknowledge owners' loss mitigation efforts in premium rates, says respected fire engineer Stephen Burton.

He told a Sedgwick seminar on aluminium composite panel (ACP) cladding in Brisbane last week that full replacement was not always the only option and was frequently the most expensive.

Mr Burton, CEO of Brisbane-based Ferm Engineering, said alternatives were cladding's partial removal and replacement; and performance engineering to reduce the fire risk.

"If cladding is fire retardant, ie, it contains less than 30% polyethylene, partial removal may reduce the risk without major expense," Mr Burton said.

"For many buildings, it is feasible to retain some wall cladding types and mitigate potential losses."

He said performance engineering would be a cheaper alternative, but insurance premiums needed to reflect owners' efforts to reduce the overall fire risk.

Performance engineering could include supplementary fire systems, like water cannons; sprinklers in at-risk areas, for example balconies; and removing cladding from perimeter locations where there was a higher likelihood of ignition, for example, near rubbish bin storage sites or loading bays.

Mr Burton said some building owners had copped higher premiums after removing cladding because insurers argued the building's value had increased.

Owners, and their brokers, needed to demonstrate to insurers that performance engineering could significantly reduce a building's fire risk.

Ferm Engineering is working with Queensland University of Technology scientists and architects on researching and testing performance engineering options to mitigate potential losses at reduced costs.

Mr Burton said the research included more robust testing of balconies' shapes and sizes to determine how they affected the speed and spread of fires and potential water application rates for external fire suppression.

"Stopping fires spreading into ACP cladding, if it contains less than 30% polyethylene, can be achieved by creating fire breaks and other engineering solutions," Mr Burton said.

Full ACP cladding replacement could create additional problems, including damaging waterproofing, and occupational health and safety risks for workers using scaffolding to remove and replace cladding.

Mr Burton said a simple but obviously effective measure was to ban smoking in high-rise buildings, including on balconies. “Cigarettes have been identified as the cause of the three cladding fires that have occurred in Australia,” he said.

Mr Burton, a nationally certified engineer, has been a qualified fire engineer for more than 25 years and is highly respected in the field.

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