

Oregon program cuts fires, deaths

Continued from page 1

Jolly said he requested five additional inspectors for 1973-74. Gov. J. James Exon, however, cut three of the proposed evaluators from the budget. Final appropriations are pending.

One of the authors of the national model code, George Tryon, said he questions whether the State Health Department can inspect mobile homes properly.

"The code obviously covers construction, plumbing, heating and electrical systems," according to Tryon, administrative secretary of the NFPA Committee on Mobile Homes and Recreational Vehicles.

"A qualified, registered engineer is needed in order to appraise the mobile home according to the code," he said. "For the construction, a structural or civil engineer; for plumbing, a sanitation engineer; and an electrical engineer for the wiring."

Jolly said the major emphasis of the Nebraska mobile home program has been sanitation.

"We're not looking at stresses or the frame, these should come from an engineer, but the portions that we look at are the sanitation aspect," Jolly said. "The drains and whether they're trapped or not, the location of the electrical box and whether it's adequately covered."

Minimum standards

Thirty-seven states have adopted a minimum standard for mobile homes. While Nebraska's program apparently has not curbed mobile home fires, several other inspection procedures have proven successful.

Three programs have emerged to evaluate mobile homes: state inspection, self-inspection by MHMA and third-party evaluation by an independent testing agency such as Underwriters' Laboratories.

Nineteen states have initiated a state program, eight have third-party evaluations while two states, Minnesota and Indiana, accept both programs, according to Larry Baron of the MHMA State Legislative Division. Eight states have not initiated inspection programs, he added.

In Nebraska, the taxpayers provide the money for the program while Oregon charges the manufacturers for each evaluation, according to W.F. Longacre, supervisor of the Oregon Mobile Home and Recreational Vehicle Division.

The Oregon program is not only self-supporting but since the state adopted the standard in 1969, the proportionate number of mobile home fires has fallen sharply, according to the Oregon state fire marshal.

Fire frequencies

In 1969, one fire was reported for every 276.12 mobile homes in Oregon while two years later one fire occurred in every 520.82 units, according to the state fire marshal. Fires had decreased 47.1 per cent, he said.

One fire occurred for every 144.44 mobile homes in Nebraska during 1971, according to the state fire marshal. Mobile home fires also were 3.2 times more frequent than conventional home blazes, the fire marshal said.

Although Oregon has nearly seven times as many mobile homes as Nebraska, seven deaths occurred in these Nebraska dwellings during 1971 while none was recorded in Oregon, according to the fire marshalls' reports.

"The (Oregon) program has checked fires effectively," Longacre said. "Strong inspection has brought the quality of mobile homes awfully close to regular stick dwellings."

In Oregon, a staff of four electrical and plumbing inspectors, and a structural engineer screens the state's 13 mobile home factories once every 10 days, Longacre said. He added that the staff also conducts spot checks at 12 California manufacturers' factories that sell homes in Oregon, three plants in Washington and 10 Idaho firms.

"If Nebraska has statutory authority so far as surveillance of mobile homes, what's the problem?" asked Davenport of MHMA. "It's easily done. You



Mobile homes . . . have 3.2 times more fires than conventional houses.

charge a pro-rated fee per home and the manufacturer pays it. And they underwrite the cost of inspection. We find no fault with that. I'll go a little further. Had every state adopted a mobile home code, there wouldn't have been any need for federal legislation."

Self-inspection

Mobile home manufacturers also have initiated a self-inspection program, according to Henry Omson, director of the MHMA standards division.

The organization, which includes 75 per cent of the 334 manufacturers in the United States, conducts about 200 weekly inspections in its members' 700 plants, Omson said. Thirteen of Nebraska's 16 factories are MHMA members and plant managers said that, on the average, MHMA inspectors check their production monthly during a three-hour evaluation.

Third-party inspection, where the manufacturer contracts with an independent evaluator and pays the inspection cost, has proven to be an effective screening program in North Carolina, according to Kenneth Dixon, deputy commissioner of the North Carolina Department of Insurance.

"We believe that it's cut the program cost significantly," Dixon said. "We feel sure that it has cut fires and construction problems."

The NFPA's Tryon said he believes third-party inspection might be appropriate for Nebraska.

"Third-party inspection definitely would be the most feasible means for Nebraska," he said. "The state could conceivably monitor the production in that state but who knows when somebody from Iowa or Oklahoma or any other state is going to bring a mobile home in?"

"If you then say that we have to also inspect plants out-of-state that ship into Nebraska than you are further diluting your available technical forces," he

added.

Limited manpower

Although Nebraska has tried to monitor incoming mobile homes, limitations on manpower have made such screening nearly impossible, Jolly said.

Few of Nebraska's neighboring states have adopted a mobile home standard and if they have, many have not started inspection programs.

South Dakota, Wyoming and Oklahoma have not accepted a minimum standard while Iowa, Kansas and Missouri have not initiated comprehensive inspections. Minnesota, North Dakota and Colorado have adopted an inspection program.

Two congressmen also have added some kindling to the inspection fire.

A bill introduced by Rep. Louis Frey, R-Fla., would place mobile homes under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) while another measure from Rep. John Moss, D-Calif., provides that mobile home inspection would be a function of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

MHMA lobbyist Baron said the manufacturer's association supports the concept of Frey's bill but has not formally endorsed the legislation. He added that MHMA has taken no position on Moss' bill.

Legislation, however, will not prevent all mobile home fires. Because of individual and manufacturers' carelessness, Nebraskans may continue to die in mobile home fires. The consumer also must be aware of the potential dangers of any product.

As Lincoln Fire Chief Dallas Johnson said: "The tragedy of mobile homes is that persons are probably getting what they pay for. Perhaps those in mobile homes should be aware of the product. Buyer beware. In Flip Wilson's words: 'What you see is what you get.'"

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ERA hearing set for 2 p.m.

A hearing on legislative attempts to withdraw Nebraska's ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution will be held by the Unicameral's Government Committee at 2 p.m. today.

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