



2001

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FIRE CHIEF  
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BATTALION CHIEF

...SERVING THE CITY OF VISTA AND THE VISTA FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

## BULLETIN

CLICK ANYWHERE on THIS PAGE to CHIMNEY CHASE & TOP SHROUD CONSTRUCTION at InspectApedia.com

Attention Residents of Cortez Ave.; Clear Crest Circle; Apollo Dr. & Sunny Crest Circle.

Homes in your neighborhood have fireplaces with metal chimneys (as do most homes build recently).

A family in the 600 block of Cortez Avenue experienced an early morning fire that was related to the metal chimney. The parents had been out for the evening and returned home about 1 am. Their two children, 10 and 6, were asleep, as was their grandmother.

As they were getting ready for bed, they heard strange noises in the attic – a pounding and crackling sound. They turned the lights on. Lights flickered and went out. The husband checked for the source of the noise, and could see fire on the roof at the intersection of the chimney and the roof. He and his wife evacuated everyone and called 9-1-1.

You may have watched the fire fighters battling to stop the fire racing through the attic. We were able to control it, but as the homeowners told us, if they had gone to bed a little earlier, or returned home a little later, it could have been a tragedy.

Vista Fire Department has dealt with several fires that are similar to this one. The common denominator is the metal fireplace box and flue. There is some specific limitation for this type of fireplace – limitations that were outlined in the manufacturer's installation and maintenance guide. We will repeat the cautions below.

The second factor that seems to be involved in some of these fires is a decorative cap that was installed over the manufacturer's spark arrestor and cap assembly.

The Fire Chief and the City Building Official believe that the cap used in your homes should be removed. A sketch of that decorative cap is included with this letter.

While this series of fires should be cause for concern, that concern can be resolved by taking five steps:

1. Limit the wood that you burn to those types approved by the manufacturer of the fireplace and chimney.
2. Don't build too big a fire.
3. Have your fireplace and chimney inspected by a reputable chimney sweep or fireplace installer. (It may be time to have it swept.)

- 4. Have the decorative cap removed, leaving in place the louvered chimney flue top cap with it's spark arrestor (screen) on the top.
- 5. Have the chimney flue chase (interior) inspected for signs of blackening, and report it to the fire department or building department if discovered.

This inspection is made from the attic at the point where it meets the chimney. Special attention must be paid to wood framing at the very top of the interior of the chimney chase.

A careful inspection is a critical step. If your fireplace and flue have been creating too much heat for the wood construction inside the chimney structure, it may have been slowly "baking" that wood. When wood is presented with high heat time-after-time, the heat "cooks" the wood, reducing the temperature necessary to ignite it. Fire experts call the process "pyrolysis". Eventually, an ordinary temperature fire could ignite the previously baked wood, and a fire starts.

Be sure to take ordinary precautions, like always closing the fireplace screen, not burning a fire with the glass doors closed, never burning trash, Christmas trees or gift wrapping, construction lumber or plywood.

Your fireplace can give you lots of enjoyment – as long as you follow the simple precautions.

Please call the City Building Department if you have questions regarding the decorative shroud or other chimney structural issues. Their phone number is on their notice, included with this bulletin.

If you have any questions on this or other fire safety concerns, please call Fire Marshal Paul Dawson, at (760) 726-2144.

Sincerely,

*Roger K. Purdie*  
 Roger K. Purdie  
 Fire Chief

enclosures:

- Copy of manufacturer's text limiting wood products to be burned
- Sketch of decorative cap; sketch of required flue cap
- Building Officials notice

**PRESS RELEASE --- COMMUNITY WARNING**

**WHO:**

**Owners and residents of dwellings that have both factory built fireplaces and decorative chimney shrouds.**

**WHAT:**

**Do not use the fireplace if it is shroud equipped. Fires caused by these shrouds have brought an awareness of the fact that these shrouds are a foreign component in a listed assembly. Their use was never provided for in the original installation instructions for the UL rated fireplace assembly by the original equipment manufacturer, therefore they never shroud have been allowed installed in the first place. Their use voids OEM warranty on the fireplace, the warranty on the chimney pipe, and the UL Listing of the fireplace, and chimney is also voided. Therefore there is no 'Grandfathering' possible since the shroud should not have been there in the first place.**

**Recently adopted International Mechanical, Residential and Fire codes reinforce this by requiring that chimney shrouds either be UL listed and labeled – or removed.**

**Besides being a violation of the codes and a life safety issue, shrouds may also void certain homeowners insurance coverage policies. Chimney shrouds are also the subject of many construction defect litigation cases and are at the center of a class action lawsuit being filed against the factory built fireplace industry.**

**Correction consists of removal of the violating shroud, inspection of the interior of the chimney chase and the reinstallation of either a factory built listed spark arrestor and a UL listed / labeled replacement shroud if the shroud look is desired. UL listed replacement shrouds that meet the building code are now available for almost 50% of the fireplace brands.**



Are we looking at one primary cause – or several?

- improper use of fireplace

  - wrong fuels

  - fires too big – “over-fire”

- improper installation

  - mixing of parts listed only as package

  - bad installation

- addition of decorative cap not listed for specific chimney

- addition of glass front – not listed for specific fireplace

Does the industry know about the problem(s)?

- Have they done anything about it/ them?

  - Is their effort adequate?

  - How is information passed to consumer?

  - Should we assist?

- Are there lawsuits pending? Completed?

Should we take the problem(s) to the public?

- Should it be through Fire-Arson Task Force?

- Does it require (or benefit from)

  - County Fire Chiefs' OK or pre-knowledge?

Can we simplify it enough to explain to the press?

- press conference?

  - show & tell

    - photos of OK types of chimney caps

    - photo of chimney under construction

      - or mock-up

    - photo of fire damage

sample of pyrophoric wood  
wood baked in oven – several samples  
which investigators as spokespersons?  
Building Officials?

involve private industry in press conference?  
manufacturers  
distributors – installers

Press release only – instead of press conference?

Can we lead the citizen through an “if-then” sequence?  
handout?

How many directly or possibly related fires in SD Co?

What impact will it have on departments?  
phone calls: How do I know? What do I do?  
site inspection requests  
Building Department requests for service

Recommended legislation  
UBC – CaBC  
Local policy  
inspection after stucco

Local ordinance

Require landlord to advise renter proper fuel  
in writing at rental contract  
post on fireplace:  
(permanent – heat resistive)

**WARNING: DO NOT BURN  
Christmas trees, gasoline, tires,  
construction lumber, plywood...**

Require removal of non-UL decorative cap  
“z-clear” in one-hour chase – “as per one  
hour on flue side of chase”  
(All local Building Code must relate to topo,  
geo, climate)

State legislation

Require inspection of “z-clear” chase interior  
@ sale  
(All local ordinances listed above)

prepare handout(s)

prepare photo enlargements

prepare "evidence" – pyrophoric sample,  
cap, shroud

prepare enlargement of key points

- improper use of fireplace
  - wrong fuels
  - fires too big – "over-fire"
- improper installation
  - mixing of parts listed only as package
  - faulty installation
  - addition of decorative cap not listed for specific chimney
- addition of glass front – not listed for specific fireplace

identify spokespersons

• outline conference

identify site

announce with press release