

Sampling to Validate Insurance Claims

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Performing air sampling for purposes of insurance claim validation can be a tricky business. It is a practice that is often done, many times providing an unclear picture of what is going on in the building. Visual examination of the damage is still the best way to address an insurance claim. Air sampling may be required for verification on some projects. However, those performing the sampling should be aware of the limitations of such sampling. I have worked as consultant on several projects where small water damage claims have turned into rather large mold claims which in my opinion could have been avoided.

Remember, in hiring the services of consultants when a water damage claim is made, it is important to have either a multi-disciplined consultant or a team of consultants with experience in building construction, building science and microbial contamination. A good consulting company may have a higher initial cost, but can drastically reduce the overall costs of many claims. A good consultant, before performing sampling of any type should interview building occupants and perform a thorough visual assessment of the building. Adjusters that bring in companies to simply start taking samples in a suspected microbial contaminated area can create confusion and be, at least, misleading. This approach may be helping to fuel the escalating cost of remediation projects. There will be a time when sampling will be necessary to verify contamination, verify successful remediation or to help in identifying medical conditions. The initial visit to the site may or may not be that time.

The drawback of performing sampling before a thorough assessment of the building has been performed is that contaminants sampled in air may or may not be related to the claim made. Segregating damages is a tricky business which is overlooked on many projects. The adjuster then allows a claim for a specific area (e.g. pipe break in basement) and bases part of that claim on samples taken by the consultant. The problem with this scenario is that after the remediation and damages are remediated, subsequent air samples show the building is still contaminated and the owner wants the insurer to pay additional cleanup costs. What was a simple pipe break claim has now turned into an extremely expensive remediation project. So what happened?

First, this is why it takes a multi-talented team of professionals to perform such projects. In the above scenario, everything is based on samples and limited attention was paid to causes or current building conditions. The remediation on the above project was probably successful, but sampling says different because no one paid attention to other factors during the initial assessment of the claim. Those other factors could include the chronic basement moisture problems, excessive number of plants and aquariums on the first floor, inadequate ventilation in the building, attic condensation problems or the negative building pressures being created by the whole-house fan, poor HVAC system hygiene and generally poor hygiene throughout the building. In addition, dew-points were being reached in various locations throughout the building.

Second, in an effort to expedite the claim and keep costs minimal, many adjusters simply test and clean without any thought of building assessment or conditions. This is, in many cases, a costly mistake being made by insurers. It appears that in many cases, in the rush to limit claims, insurers may be actually increasing their costs by overlooking critical information and therefore paying for cleanups which have little to do with the initial claim.

Closer Look Environmental has developed a program to provide a thorough assessment of the building when claims are made. The assessment documents the conditions in the building and other defects which may be creating problems. This provides the adjuster with information critical to allowing or disallowing a claim and can help to segregate the two. Our assessments

also document through instrumentation and digital images other building condition which may be factors in the overall conditions within the building (e.g. humidity levels, hygiene of HVAC system and building, ambient air and surface temperatures and dew-points). This proactive approach can limit the number of cases where insurers end up paying for the remediation of areas not related to a claim. The current situation on many cases I have witnessed is this, claims are segregated air sampling is not. The proactive answer to the problem is addressing the issues before allowing an initial claim, so that the building owner understands the problem and also understands that causes may be more than one for indoor fungal amplification. This approach helps in identifying what is the insurers responsibility and what is the home or building owner's responsibility. It also helps to clarify what is a defect and what is a maintenance or hygiene issue. This approach translates into reduced costs for claims and helps in the prevention of future claims by letting building owners know what responsibility is theirs.

Third and finally, it is important for adjusters to understand that in the majority of mold related claims, some building defect is the root cause of the problem. There may be one cause or many and it is important that the building be assessed by a company having experienced professionals in both building science and microbial contamination to determine the exact nature of the problem. This will include finding the source(s) of the problem(s). Performing a successful remediation without understanding causes will be a futile waste of resources and could lead to further claims or bad faith claims. The bottom line is that in many cases, insurers are picking up the tab for claims which may be the result of defects which were not discovered and which may not be attributed to allowable claims. This should be reason enough to evaluate which companies are performing the assessments of water damage and mold related claims for your company. Choosing the right company to assess such buildings could translate into lower claims costs for insurers by limiting the remediation to areas which are covered under the policy.



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