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Concrete Home Restored After Fire

Neskowin, Ore. (October 26, 2006) –On July 12, Neal and Linda Anderson moved into their Oregon coast dream home, again.

On September 10, 2005, just over three months after they first moved into their Neskowin home, a fire burned through the home's garage, attic and roof. But it didn't completely destroy the house or its contents, because the couple had chosen to build a concrete house using ICFs (insulating concrete forms).

The home the Andersons wanted when they first talked with builder Larry Bilyeu of Bilyeu Homes in western Washington was to be built partially in the ground to conserve energy and save on heating and cooling costs. The plans were from a model home the Andersons bought in 1986. Built on a Spokane, Wash. Street of Dreams with energy-efficiency as a theme, the house won the top award.

"Spokane is in eastern Washington where they have very hot summers and cold winters. That entire house, which also had concrete walls and berms, was heated with a single wood burning fireplace," Anderson said. "I never paid more than $30 a month to heat or cool the house in Spokane.

"My wife and I loved that house and thought if we could build it on the Oregon coast with a view of the ocean, it would be the perfect house," Anderson said. So when they moved to Oregon, they bought the plans and searched for a builder.

"The Anderson's wanted to capture the insulating factor of the soil against the concrete walls. We couldn't recommend setting a house in the ground, so we suggested using Reward ICFs," said Larry Bilyeu.

The house was constructed between January and May 2005. On Memorial Day, the Andersons settled into their dream home.

"This house was absolutely everything we wanted it to be. We are up from the shore 700 feet, and have a beautiful view of the beach, the shoreline and a waterfowl sanctuary. It is tremendously quiet. We never hear the wind. The quietness of this house is something to behold," Anderson said. In addition it seemed to be as energy efficient as they had hoped.

But on September 10, hot cigarette ashes were emptied into a trashcan in the garage, and a fire smoldered and slowly spread from the trashcan, into the ceiling and attic of the Anderson dream home.

Meanwhile, Neal Anderson, unaware of the danger in the garage, prepared dinner in the kitchen. Linda was in the master bedroom on the opposite side of the house.

A smoke alarm in the master bedroom alerted the couple to the fire. A neighbor, who is also a member of the Tillamook County Volunteer Fire Department, called in the fire alarm just before 7 p.m., then went to get a small fire truck parked nearby. The Andersons, their two dogs and the neighbors stood on the driveway and watched the house burn for 35 minutes before the volunteers with the large fire truck arrived.

"I'll never forget that day," Anderson said. "It was surreal to watch that fire."

The concrete walls did just what they were supposed to do. They held up the roof over the house and they did not burn. The fire was contained in the garage, an office at the back of the house, which did not have concrete walls, and the attic. The concrete walls kept the ceiling from collapsing into the house.

According to Anderson, the concrete walls did an excellent job of containing the fire, which allowed Neal and Linda to get to safety.

"We were able to save all our furniture, clothing, jewelry and photographs," Anderson said. Although there was no fire damage to the appliances, they had to be replaced because the smoke permeated the insulation in the appliances and you can't get the smell out, according to Anderson.

"We are using the same dining room and kitchen tables and chairs that we used before the fire. Instead of having to replace our furniture, the insurance company was able to have it cleaned and stored until the house could be restored. We were able to save the albums with the pictures of the kids when they were little," he added.

Mary Lou Fletcher the Fire Marshall in Pacific City, Ore., said the concrete walls kept the fire in the garage area until the fire found a weak spot in the ceiling of the garage. The flames worked their way into the attic and then down into the office at the back of the house.

"Any other house would have burned to the ground," Fletcher said. "When there is a fire in this remote an area, we concentrate on protecting the surrounding houses, because by the time we get to the scene, the frame houses are gone. But in this case, there were plastic flowers in the front of the house that didn't even melt."

According to Fletcher, the fire had smoldered in the trashcan and in the garage for a long time before it became an open flame. An open garage door vented the fire giving it oxygen. While the polystyrene foam on the concrete walls melted as the fire worked its way into the attic, it did not burn.

“I didn’t know what kind of a structure the Anderson house was. I’d never seen a fire burn the way this one did,” said Fletcher. “The front of the house looked fine. Only the back of the house was consumed by the fire.”

“Insurance companies should give people who build with Reward ICFs a discount on their fire insurance,” Anderson said. “We spent everything that was allowed for rebuilding the house, because we had to tear everything out to the concrete walls. But we didn’t use very much of the amount allowed for personal contents reimbursement because we were able to save nearly everything.”

“I’m so grateful for these Reward walls,” Anderson said. “ I built with them the first time for their energy efficiency. I wasn’t even thinking about fire. There is no doubt in my mind that they saved our house, and may have saved our lives.”

American Restoration Company of Salem, Ore., completed the restoration of the house. John Stoddard, president of American Restoration said his crews were able to save the concrete walls and floor joists. Foam insulation was sprayed on the walls and furring strips were attached to support sheetrock and siding.

The Andersons moved into their dream home, again, on July 12, 2006. The house is still as quiet as it was when the Andersons moved in the first time. As far as they can tell, it will be just as energy efficient. And they know for sure, it will protect them from fire.

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Editors note:
Reward Wall Systems is the first company to earn noncombustible construction building code approval. When burning, the materials have less than half the toxins of burning wood (pine), and are self-extinguishing. According to tests by Omega Point Laboratory, the toxicity level or the polystyrene is 24 and flame speed is less than 25. Smoke development is less than 450.

"Reward structures are widely known for their safety in tornadoes and hurricanes," said Kelvin Doerr, P.E. Reward Wall Systems’ vice president of engineering and technical services. "Of equal importance is safety in case of fire and Reward walls offer unprecedented fire safety." The four-hour rating for the Reward 11" form, and the three-hour fire rating of the 9" Reward form, give homeowners time to get out of burning structures, saving lives and property.

Neskowin, population 169, is in Tillamook County, west of Salem. It is a remote area along the Oregon coast. Many of the area’s 408 housing units are vacation homes. There are just 117 persons per square mile.

Located in Omaha, Nebraska for the past 18 years, Reward Wall Systems, Inc. is the leading manufacturer and distributor of insulating concrete forms used in residential and commercial structures. Reward’s customers include developers, architects, general contractors, residential contractors, and construction supply distributors. To learn more about Reward Wall Systems, Inc. go to www.rewardwalls.com.