

AIB Policy on Building Materials Quality and Testing

Summary

Building materials quality and testing is an important issue of risk management that needs to be addressed in a focused and coordinated manner by Governments, industry, research institutes and professional bodies in the built environment. AIB advocates for research into this issue, product conformity of building products and a thorough and cost-effective testing regime.

Background

In 2003, a hangar at the RAAF Fairburn base in Canberra collapsed due to faulty building materials, which led to twelve people being seriously injured. In 2012, up to 24 imported glass panels fell from the entrance of the new ASIO building being constructed in Canberra, although in this instance no one was injured. These incidents highlight the need for greater emphasis on building materials quality, as well as some form of testing regime.

There are a number of reasons why construction production quality is an issue, and product conformity¹ and conformity assessment² for building products do not currently exist in Australia. These include:

- Time and cost are key drivers in the construction process, and quality often comes third behind these two drivers;
- There is a perception that the cost paid for higher-priced products will not bring value for money;
- There is resistance from many manufacturers;
- The Federal Government has not been proactive on this issue, and the market has as a result moved toward reducing 'red tape';
- There has been a loss of technical resources, as well as delegated responsibility;
- Buyers in a global marketplace are often not well informed of whether the products they are purchasing have been subject to product conformity and conformity assessment;
- The procurement market has been and is changing – there is a trend towards integrated project delivery; and there are new stakeholders such as banks, superannuation funds and insurance funds; and

¹ Product Conformity is the testing of performance to prove that the material, component, joint or assembly is capable of conforming to the requirements of the relevant Standard. In Australia very few construction Standards include Product Conformity requirements, and unless these are made 'Normative' (compulsory), manufacturers can claim compliance to the Standard without actually doing any testing.

² Conformity Assessment is the periodic assessment of manufactures to check that the products they produce meet the requirements of the product Standard. The requirements for this process are specified in a number of ISO/IEC Standards.

- There is the pressure of international trade obligations, and the desire not to be seen to be putting up trade barriers to the Australian market.

Policy Positions

AIB will be at the forefront of this cutting edge issue of risk management and holds the following positions in relation to building materials quality and testing:

- Product Conformity should be implemented, with a shift from an 'informative' to a 'normative' approach, meaning that some form of testing would become compulsory;
- A voluntary National Register of Certified Construction Products (NRCCP) would be valuable to inform the industry and building professionals;
- AIB will not undertake building materials testing in the foreseeable future, either on behalf of its members, or for third parties;
- Standards and regulations should not be overly harsh, but at the same time should be rigorous enough to adequately protect construction workers and the users of the building or other construction throughout its lifespan;
- Responsibility for adherence to the various applicable Australian standards and regulations should rest with the manufacturers, not with builders;
- Consumer protection, safety and sustainability are the way to advocate the issue, as the Federal Government does not want to be seen to be introducing protectionist trade measures;
- There should be drafting, submission and acceptance of project proposals for individual standards to revise from 'informative' to 'normative';
- The testing of products should ideally be at the point of manufacture, with overseas standards thorough enough to have faith in their processes; and
- There should be some level of identification of the source of product inputs (i.e. traceability).

Actions

- AIB will advocate revising the relevant standards from 'informative' to 'normative'. The types of building products to be revised first will be determined on a priority list in conjunction with the Australasian Procurement & Construction Council (APCC).
- AIB will advocate for a voluntary National Register of Certified Construction Products.
- Quality research is needed addressing:
 1. Identification of high risk construction products.
 2. Non-conformance – what is the level & what the problems are.
 3. Identification of the likelihood of construction product failure.
 4. Cost to the industry and economy of construction product failure.AIB will assist APCC by helping to coordinate this research.
- AIB will continue to inform its members on this issue.