

# Notebook...

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## Flushing Out the Best Low-Flow Toilets

by Kathy Price-Robinson

The battle lines are drawn in the ongoing controversy over low-flow toilets, which were mandated by the 1992 Energy Policy and Conservation Act. On one side are toilet manufacturers, environmentalists, and water utilities. Manufacturers, who want to preserve the tons of money they have invested retooling plants to make the new fixtures, prefer the federal standard over the patchwork of state and local standards it replaced. Environmentalists and water utilities also find the government influence tolerable if it leads Americans into conservation: At an average of five flushes per person per day, a family of four will save more than 13,000 gallons of water a year when using the 1.6-gallon toilets.

Lined up against the federal low-flow regs is representative Joe Knollenberg (R-Mich.), who is trying to reverse the low-flow provision of the Energy Act for both toilets and shower heads. The scheduled hear-

ing on Knollenberg's bill, H.R. 859, was canceled by the House Commerce Subcommittee on Energy and Power, but he is expected to introduce another bill in January, when the political makeup of the committee could be more sympathetic to the bill. Knollenberg has asked for and received the support of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), which also dislikes the idea of big government meddling in the bathroom. "We feel it's a consumer choice," says Patti Burgio, NARI's director of governmental affairs. "And it's more of a state's right or a local code issue."

Caught in the middle are contractors, who worry about callbacks caused by reduced water flow that can't keep waste lines clear, and consumers, most of whom support water conservation but who are fed up with so-called low-flow toilets that require double flushes.

The issue received national attention when humor writer Dave Barry wrote a 1997 column bashing low-flow toilets that prompted an avalanche of letters from other frustrated homeowners. It also brought him a call from Contractors 2000, an association of independent plumbing contractors, who offered to install in Barry's house a low-flow toilet the association claimed actually worked. It did, and a subsequent Barry column (in which he would not identify the manufacturer), prompted a second round of calls, this time from consumers asking Contractors 2000 how they could get the same fixture. The association dispersed those calls to its members.

### A Better Toilet

While Contractors 2000 itself has taken no stand on the issue, at least one member, David Ion of Los Osos, Calif., says there is no need to repeal the low-flow mandate, because better design and manufacturing practices have improved low-flow toilets. The initial troubles were with the trapway, which was made smaller in early low-flow models when it should have been made larger. Also, the trapway was typically not enameled past the point visible to the user, leaving a rough surface that snagged waste and caused clogging. In addition, the latest low-flow toilets flush with a more effective swirling motion, so the bowl is more

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The low-flow toilet controversy continues, as toilet manufacturers support the 1992 mandate, and some builder groups oppose it. Contractors and consumers are caught in the middle.

# Welfare-to-Work Can Ease Labor Shortage


**W**hile many small contractors have an aversion to dealing with the government, the new Welfare-to-Work Partnership may be worth exploring as a partial solution to the shortage of skilled labor. The partnership was formed in 1997 by five giant companies — Burger King, Monsanto, Sprint USA, United Airlines, and UPS — each of which has pledged to hire former welfare recipients. Since then, the partnership has expanded to include hundreds of companies, 70% of which are small- to medium-sized firms, including several small contractors. Half of the firms involved have fewer than 25 employees. A major attraction for businesses is the tax credit available for hiring welfare workers — up to \$28,000 per worker over a three-year period — as well as funds for training and other benefits.

That's what attracted McAllen, Texas, roofing contractor Lynn Lefgren, who was having trouble finding trained roofers, especially in the summer months when many of his workers pack up their families and move north to harvest crops. "I was turning work away," Lefgren says, emphasizing that the problem is not lack of manpower, but of skilled labor. "I can get hundreds of people to crawl up on

a roof. But to get them to understand what they are doing and why, that's the challenge." When in-house training for new, unskilled hires proved too expensive, Lefgren started looking into government programs. So far, he has hired six former welfare recipients, with six more lined up to be trained. The training takes place both at the community college, where cultural, language, and work skills are taught, and in-house, where trainees learn about tools, materials, and safety.

Lefgren took his participation a step further and, with involvement from the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) and other government and business groups, helped to create a new training center. The National Roofing Training Institute will train 400 roofers, all former welfare recipients, in the coming year. Funds are also available for transportation and lodging to train workers from other states.

"We have a long list of contractors who are willing and able to hire these workers," said Bill Good, executive vice president of the NRCA, explaining that wages for trained roofers range from \$7 to \$12 per hour, plus benefits.

To find out more about the Welfare-to-Work Partnership, call 888/872-5621, or check out the Web site ([www.welfareto-work.org](http://www.welfareto-work.org)). To find out more about the National Roofing Training Institute, call Bill Good at 847/299-9070. 

## Offcuts ...

**Get down, now**, if you're reading this while standing on a ladder manufactured by Krause. The Roscoe, Illinois, company is recalling 73,000 ladders that may have faulty hinges that can unlock during use, causing the ladder to collapse. Recalled ladders include the 12- and 16-foot MultiMatic (models 121482 and 121499, respectively), and 12-foot TriMatic (model 121321). Ladders may be returned to the place of purchase; otherwise, call Krause (877/572-8731).

**OSB is overtaking plywood in market share**, according to APA-The Engineered Wood Association. OSB now accounts for 48% of panel output. In 1980, when it was introduced, OSB accounted for 4% of the panel output.

**The 10 building trades with the highest labor shortages** (from a 1997 survey by the National Center for Construction Education and Research): 1. electrician, 2. carpenter, 3. plumber, 4. mason, 5. sheet-metal installer, 6. hvac technician, 7. pipefitter, 8. welder, 9. drywall installer, 10. heavy equipment operator.

**Western builders expect the boom to continue into next year**, according to survey results from the Western Building Show. Three-fourths of the 400 respondents, who are mostly developers in the western states, expect to build more homes in 1999 than in 1998, and 71% expect gross profits to increase as well. About 88% of respondents believed home values would increase over the next three years.

# Scaffolding with a European Flair

**A** newly-introduced steel and aluminum scaffolding called the SL Frame System has proved it can cut construction time off multi-story projects. The European-style staging from Safway Steel Products has no cross-bracing against the wall to impede worker access, and features integrated connecting pins that cut down on lost parts, as well as built-in OSHA-approved ladders and hatches that allow access between levels from within the framework. Orlando, Fla., plastering contractor L.D. Smith was surprised at the results when he tried the new scaffolding on a condominium project: Not only did he finish the job 25% ahead of an identical building fitted with traditional scaffolding, but the stylish staging attracted a parade of curious spectators, including building inspectors. To find a dealer, call 800/558-4772 or visit Safway's Web page at [www.safway.com](http://www.safway.com). 



High-wire work just got easier thanks to new European scaffolding with built-in safety features.

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# Pozzi Windows Opens Doors for Women

**O**regon-based Pozzi Wood Windows has taken a proactive stand on the issue of skilled-worker shortages, which are already slowing building projects around the country. Teaming up with the Women's Council of the NAHB, Pozzi has initiated a new mentoring program to bring more women into the construction industry and help them thrive once they get there. Called Cornerstone, the program will match mentors with protégés based on location and industry. All mentoring teams will be encouraged to attend a Cornerstone workshop series, and the Women's Council newsletter will feature summer and fall Cornerstone sections. This year, the program is being tested in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Nebraska, and Northern and Southern California. Next year, after the program is evaluated and tweaked, it will be rolled out nationally.

The number of women in the building industry has grown steadily but slowly in the past 20 years, from 282,000 in 1976 to 603,000 in 1996. But as



any woman who has worked on a construction site knows, there is still active and vocal opposition, and even harassment, from some male co-workers and superiors.

For more information, call the NAHB Women's Council (800/368-5242) or Pozzi Wood Windows (800/547-6880). 

# New Shear Wall Design Reduces Hold-Downs

Initial tests by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the NAHB indicate that the restraint provided by sheathed corners alone can result in walls that are 80% to 90% as strong as walls equipped with steel hold-downs at the corners. Additional tests are needed to determine guidelines for field application of the corner framing method. If corner sheathing is shown to resist seismic and wind loading, roughly \$1,200 could be saved on each building, according to *HomeBase News*, a publication of the NAHB Research Center.



Preliminary tests by HUD indicate that corner sheathing may provide adequate shear resistance and reduce the need for steel hold-downs.

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likely to clear completely on the first try.

Even among supporters of low-flow toilets, however, there is still no agreement about which are the best brands, beyond the fact that budget models costing less than \$100 will probably not do the trick. And that is a problem for homeowners who insist on buying the cheapest fixture available. "People place a very low value on certain things in their home," Ion says, "and the toilet is one of them. If they needed a new VCR or TV, they'd find the money to buy a good one."

In Ion's opinion, one of the best low-flow toilets is Gerber's Ultra Flush #21-302, the brand installed in Barry's home. It's also high on the list of plumber Terry Love in Redmond, Wash. At \$279, the Ultra Flush was named in the May issue of *Consumer*

*Reports* as the best low-flow toilet and a best buy. In second place was the pump-assisted Kohler Trocadero Powerlite K-3437, at a pricey \$940. Tied for third were the Crane Economiser 3-804 at \$230, and the Eljer Berkeley 081-1595 at \$420. Models were tested for both solid and liquid waste removal, how well the toilet used water to wash down the sides of the bowl, soiling and odor factors, and noise.

Love's favorite, however, is the Toto UltraMax #MSS854114S. In addition to the toilets listed above, other plumbers who responded to Love's informal survey recommended Kohler and Briggs. Most of the fixtures recommended by experts cost around \$250, with a few costing up to \$750. But efficient, cutting-edge toilets aside, many voters are still sitting on the earlier models, and plunging their clogged toilet has become routine. Come January, Knollenberg may still have a case.



## Offcuts ...

***The end to trade in old growth wood products is near.*** MacMillan Bloedel, Canada's largest timber company, announced it will end the practice of clear-cut logging in old-growth forests, according to the Rainforest Action Network. The company, based in Vancouver, also pledged to set aside its pristine old-growth zones for scientific study.

***Productivity drops during overtime hours,*** according to a study first published in the *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management* (212/705-7496). The study looked at four industrial projects and concluded that efficiency was down 10% to 15% when workers put in more than 50 hours per week.