

Defective building products could be rife throughout the building industry

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Auckland lawyer Adina Thorn explains why she thinks there are non-complying building products throughout the building industry

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The recent discovery that substandard seismic grade steel reinforcing bar has been supplied to the New Zealand market comes as no surprise, says lawyer Adina Thorn who is leading a class action against defective house cladding and building another in relation to non-compliant steel mesh.

Ms Thorn says anecdotal evidence suggests low-quality steel products imported from Asia appear to be rife in the local construction industry.

In one case that was dubbed as “isolated” by the importer, steel bar sold was of a lower strength than the standard stamped on it. It was returned to the importer.

Ms Thorn questions the extent of problems in steel building products and how far it goes.

Ms Thorn tells NBR Radio’s Grant Walker she is reluctant to call it the tip of the iceberg. “We just don’t know. The public is kept in the dark as public information is hard to obtain and is not easy to understand.”

She says steel reinforcing standards are critical in a country like New Zealand, situated in the earthquake collision zone between the Indo-Australian and Pacific tectonic plates meaning major fault lines run the length of the country.

After the Christchurch earthquakes, the standard was updated so steel mesh in all construction had to have 10% ductility (elongation), to increase the resilience of floor slabs during seismic movement.

And in November, the government made changes to the testing regime for steel mesh sold in New Zealand, whether made locally or imported, which will be implemented at the end of May.

“The changes increase the number of samples which need to be tested, and the testing is to be done by internationally accredited laboratories.” Ms Thorn says.

The changes were prompted by a Commerce Commission investigation into the supply of non-compliant mesh. The commission says it intends to prosecute three suppliers for breaching the Fair Trading Act.

Ms Thorn says, unfortunately, the prosecution is unlikely to result in any compensation for affected homeowners. The use of non-compliant mesh in construction could affect future insurance claims, and result in losses due to the stigma of owning a “soft steel” home.

“New Zealand has an unfortunate recent history of constructing buildings that are not fit for purpose, in particular, due to leaky issues. Owners are left with financial liabilities through no fault of their own, and many do not have the resources to pursue compensation through the court system.”

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