FIRE SPRINKLER TALKING POINTS

Purpose of introducing Senate Bill 129

- Senate Bill 129 is a proactive response to a national movement to require fire sprinkler systems in one and two-family residential dwellings.
- The 2006 International Residential Code (IRC) included residential fire sprinkler requirements as an appendix to the code. This allowed states to adopt the 2006 IRC with the ability to choose whether to adopt or reject the residential fire sprinkler appendix.
- In preparation for the 2008 national meeting to adopt the 2009 IRC, the Fire Sprinkler Coalition, an association of more than 100 fire service, building code officials, and safety organizations held fund raisers and organized the travel for their supporters.
- In September 2008 the 2009 IRC was adopted with the residential sprinkler mandate.
- **According to Ronny J. Coleman, President of the IRC Fire Sprinkler Coalition, "We're now going to move forward at the state and local level to ensure the new code requirement is adopted"**
- Senate Bill 129 would ensure that residential fire sprinklers remain voluntary and still allow local municipalities and private insurance companies to offer incentives to homeowners who chose to make the investment.

New homes are safer than ever before.

- Due in large part to changes in residential construction technology, the number of fatal fires has dropped dramatically in the last 20 years without the installation of sprinklers or the need to mandate them.

- The International Residential Code (IRC) requires hard-wired, interconnected smoke alarms to be installed in all bedrooms, outside of them and on each additional story, including basements.

- Over 90 percent of the occupants survived fires that were reported to have occurred in homes equipped with hard-wired, interconnected smoke alarms from 2000-2004.

- Previously adopted code provisions for fire separation, fire blocking and draft stopping, emergency escape and rescue openings, electrical circuit breakers, capacity and outlet spacing, reduced need for space heaters in energy efficient homes, and many other improvements have allowed today's homes to continue to provide fire protection even as they age.

- A 2006 USFA study on the presence of working smoke alarms in residential fires from 2001-2004 showed that 88 percent of the fatal fires in single-family homes occurred where there were no working smoke alarms. The problem is not homes without sprinklers; **the problem is homes without working smoke alarms**.

Fire sprinklers are not cost effective, and costs are far greater than what advocates say they are.

- Sprinkler costs vary depending on the climate, whether the house is on a public water line, and by the size and layout of the house.
- A conservative cost for Alaska of $4 per square foot for the average 2,400-square-foot house means that a residential fire sprinkler system would cost $9,600.
- A system installed on a home drawing from a private well, as opposed to a municipal water utility, would have an additional cost of $2.50 to $3.00 per square foot.
- For homes on wells, the typical costs are higher because of the need for additional components such as storage tanks and larger pumps and generators for power outages.
- By comparison, whole-house interconnected smoke alarm systems are now being installed for around $50 per alarm.

Significant technical problems still exist.

- Unlike smoke alarms, there is no way to test sprinklers other than applying heat.
- The fire sprinkler valves must be checked periodically to verify the system is activated.
- Sprinkler heads must be checked to make sure they are clear of obstacles.
- Homeowners must be careful not to block them or paint over them.
- Some standards also specify that sprinkler pipes in the antifreeze-type systems installed in colder climates should be emptied and then refilled with an antifreeze solution every winter.
- Sprinklers will discharge water until the fire department has been notified, arrives on the scene, evaluates and determines the structure is safe, and then locates and turns off the water supply.
- Claims that less damage will be caused by a sprinkler than a fire hose are unsubstantiated.

- Additional home flooding risks come from the vulnerability of the pressurized sprinkler heads. They can activate if they are dislodged or disturbed, when there's horseplay or other types of negligence.

- Local requirements for water storage tanks and additional plumbing in the home open up the specter of frozen, pressurized pipes in some parts of the country. Adequately protecting against these problems adds further to the cost of sprinkler systems.

- The reliability of residential fire sprinklers is also questionable. There is no study that shows how long sprinkler systems will last. After smaller recalls by other companies in 1998 and 1999, a major fire sprinkler manufacturer recalled 35 million fire sprinkler heads in 2001.

Installation of residential fire sprinkler systems for one or two-family homes should never be mandatorily required by state or local governments. A homebuilder can arrange for the installation of a sprinkler safety system in your new home or can make the necessary renovations to install one in your existing home. Each homeowner should be able to make their own decision about the type of preventative device they want to use.

To require these systems, especially in a cold climate region like Alaska, would raise the cost of affordable housing while providing the least cost efficient increase in fire safety for the homeowner.