

Mold shuts portion of a state high-rise

Board of Equalization workers say building has made them ill.

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The state Board of Equalization has moved employees from two floors of its downtown high-rise headquarters after finding "a variety of molds" growing in the walls.

A memo sent to BOE staff members Monday said the 22nd and 23rd floors of the 24-story building at 450 N St. are off-limits to everyone but construction workers.

Beth Mills, a spokeswoman for the state Department of General Services, said the mold found last week between two layers of gypsum wallboard includes *Stachybotrys chartarum*, the "black mold" that has been the subject of numerous legal claims and reports of illness nationwide.

BOE says they cleared the two floors because they discovered the mold during repainting. But an attorney pointed out that the move came less than two weeks after he filed claims on behalf of four BOE employees who say that they've been sickened by working in the building, and that BOE management has covered up problems stemming from extensive water leakage into the high-rise.

If the state denies the claims, the workers intend to file lawsuits against the state, said the lawyer, Anthony Perez.

Perez said he had been contacted by dozens of BOE employees, some of whom have taken leaves of absence or are telecommuting because of respiratory and other health problems that they blame on their workplace.

Board of Equalization spokeswoman Anita Gore, who was moving from her 23rd floor office Tuesday, said the building is safe for workers.

"We have had this building's air tested and tested for mold spores, and the air quality has tested normal," she said.

But Rebecca Landeros, one of the employees who filed a claim, said the environment in the building has been less than ideal for years. She has spent 14 years working on the top few floors of the BOE headquarters, most recently on the 23rd floor.

"Since the opening of the building (in 1993), we've always had water intrusion," said Landeros, an appeals analyst. "We've had waterfalls. We've actually named waterfalls for attorneys whose offices were nearby. I've had to experience ceiling tiles falling on my desk. That was in the '90s. When I was pregnant, there was mold growing on the pillar near my desk."

Landeros complains of headaches, mysterious rashes, fatigue and blisters on her head.

She said other workers have suffered similar symptoms. About two weeks ago she was moved to the 20th floor.

Science has not established a direct link between mold and specific illnesses. But Sandy McNeel, a research scientist with state Department of Public Health, said researchers agree that molds produce indoor allergens that cause reactions in some people.

Mold isn't the only danger lurking in wet buildings, McNeel continued. Bacteria grow faster in damp environments, and so do dust mites.

"The scientific evidence is stronger at this point that chronically damp buildings are more a problem for people than specifically mold," she said. "Mold can be a canary in a coal mine that indicates there's something wrong with this building, or this room."

Opened in 1993, the BOE building is essentially a wall of more than 6,000 windows set in pre-cast concrete. Between 1999 and 2005, seven large panes of window glass failed, some sending shards of glass crashing to the street below. A state report blamed premature window gasket failure, which caused the windows to fail and water to leak into the building.

The state has since spent about \$12 million to fix the windows. Temporary scaffolding that protected passers-by has been removed.

Gore said the state Department of General Services was just finishing repairs to the windows when the mold was discovered. It was growing between layers of gypsum wallboard near a balcony that had problems with leaking.

Crews had pushed back the modular furniture so they could repaint the walls, she said. That's when they spotted discoloration on the walls. Mold was found growing inside.

"As a precaution we've moved everyone in the affected area out of their workspace," she said.

Gore said between 100 and 120 people, including legal staff members and department executives, have been relocated from the 22nd and 23rd floors to other parts of the building. About 2,200 people work in the building.

The BOE headquarters was built by the California Public Employees' Retirement System as a profit-making investment for its portfolio. It debuted on the skyline at the same time as the similarly sized Wells Fargo Center nearby, but cost only about half as much -- \$79.4 million.

At the time, Sacramento city officials complained about its design and bemoaned the fact that the state was exempt from the city's design standards.

CalPERS later sold the building to the state Department of General Services, which acts as the landlord for state departments. DGS spokeswoman Mills said it should take about four weeks to replace the moldy gypsum wallboard and bring the displaced workers back.

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