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Experts Warn of Fire Danger With Certain Electric Boxes

Federal Pacific panels commonly installed in '60s-'80s sometimes do not properly work

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Updated 10:30 PM CST, Mon, Feb 28, 2011 |



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Home inspectors are recommending that homeowners with a certain brand of electric box get an upgrade.

The federal government has issued a message of caution about Federal Pacific Stab-Lok electric panels to homeowners, electricians, home inspectors and real estate agents. The panels were installed in thousands of homes in North Texas in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s.

"We've seen people injured, burned, and we've seen houses range from a small fire in a closet to almost completely burned down," said **Mark Goodson**, an engineer who investigated a fire linked to the box for an insurance company.

In that fire, the blaze started with a popping sound before the lights went out, **Karen Clardy** said.

She saw flames shooting from the panel when she went to the garage to check her circuit breaker box.

The fire quickly jumped to the walls and then up into the attic, sending smoke throughout the house.

"It is so frightening, and I just kept saying, 'This isn't me. This isn't my house. This isn't happening to us,'" Clardy said.

When a circuit breaker gets overloaded and overheats, the breaker is supposed to trip, shutting off to prevent a fire.

But Goodson and other engineers who've studied Federal Pacific breakers say some of them don't work properly. Goodson said the breaker never cuts off and, in some cases, stays on, creating a fire risk.

A study by New York engineer Jesse Aronstein of nearly 1,500 Federal Pacific breakers found that about one out of four failed to trip when overloaded.

Federal Pacific is no longer in business.

In the 1980s, the company notified the [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) that some of its breakers did not comply with UL testing standards.

UL is a nonprofit testing service that checks the safety of electrical products.

But Federal Pacific claimed the boxes did not present a fire hazard even though they did not meet the standards.

The CPSC did not issue a recall. Instead, the agency issued a news release in 1983, saying it was closing the investigation because budget constraints prevented investigators from studying the issue further.

Clardy said she was surprised to learn the government knew about the issue, but did not issue a recall or warning.

"I can't believe they have kept this almost like a secret," she said.

[Last week, the CPSC issued an update to the 1983 news release](#) that cautions people to read the release more carefully.

"The commission closed the matter without making a determination as to the safety of FPE circuit breakers or the accuracy of the manufacturer's position on the matter," the agency said.

The release also warns people to never overload any electrical circuit and to call an electrician when in doubt.

But Goodson said the CPSC needs to go a step beyond that.

"I think the studies that were started need to be finished and, at that point in time, the CPSC needs to decide how to rectify the situation," he said.

"We have a very limited budget and resources," a CPSC spokesman said. "Reopening the investigation would be a significant decision due to the amount of time and staff that would need to be dedicated to such an effort."

Thousands of the panels are still in garages and closets in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

[Dallas home inspector Bob Charvoz](#) said he sees them all the time in homes in the Metroplex. He tells customers to replace any Federal Pacific panel to be safe.

"I think there should be some type of more general warning about it to the general public," he said.

At least one local electrician has been running newspaper ads in Dallas saying that Federal Pacific panels are unsafe and offering discounts on replacements.

Jason Leath, who lives in the Lake Highlands area of Dallas, said he replaced his Federal Pacific box recently.

"(We) just heard through the Internet and neighbors and word of mouth that it was maybe unsafe, so we decided to upgrade," Leath said.

Charvoz said Federal Pacific boxes are often found in Lake Highlands, Oak Cliff, Highland Park, Fort Worth, DeSoto, Garland and Cedar Hill.

All of those cities had many homes built in the time period when the

the name Federal Pacific should appear somewhere on the panel.

First Published: Feb 28, 2011 8:54 AM CST

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