

Firms respond to growing need for mold detection

by Robyn Friedman, Special to the Sun-Sentinel

November 10, 2003

Mold is turning into a big business in South Florida. Conduct an Internet search on the words "mold" and "South Florida," and you'll come up with Web sites for hundreds of businesses touting their services, from attorneys to allergists to inspection companies. There are horror stories about mold in schools, in homes and in commercial buildings. And mold claims are proliferating, due to the national attention given to cases in Texas and California.

Mold inspections are becoming increasingly popular when people purchase homes, joining structural and wood-boring insect inspections as contract contingencies. And companies are responding to the increasing demand for both residential and commercial inspections.

"A lot of our clients have a mutual problem with mold, be it an institutional client, an industrial client or a residential client," said Dennis Giordano, president of Calvin, Giordano & Associates Inc., a Fort Lauderdale-based engineering, surveying and planning firm. "So because of that and all the publicity about mold, we felt it would be a good venture for us to get into."

The firm recently established a Microbial Assessment & Indoor Air Quality Division to provide clients with inspection services and advice on remediation. Giordano plans to steer clear of remediation, other than providing guidance to his clients. "That way, we'll be perceived as totally neutral," he said.

The firm plans to serve its mostly commercial clientele, which includes builders and developers. "We'd like to be proactive and work with our developer/builder clients to help them determine beforehand what design and construction activities they can take to ensure that there isn't a mold problem," Giordano said.

The firm will utilize equipment such as handheld moisture meters, laser particle counters and infrared thermometers, in addition to air samples, to determine the presence of mold spores, said Jeremy Ferderber a Calvin, Giordano environmental scientist who specializes in indoor air quality. Ferderber holds certifications from the Indoor Air Quality Association and the Association of Energy Engineers.

Giordano said the firm has already done a few inspections and that business is picking up. He plans to market the new service to the firm's existing clients and anticipates that the new division will increase billings by \$150,000 to \$200,000 in the first year. Giordano stressed that his focus is on preventing mold, rather than on exposing mold for litigation purposes, and he thinks that the potential market for his services in South Florida is large. "If you're going to be in the mold business, this is the place to be," he said.

Another firm focusing on the detection of mold, but more for the residential market, is Miami-based Mold Detection Services Inc., which launched in January and conducts inspections using high-tech equipment as well as two female beagles.

"They've been using dogs in Europe for 20 years that detect mold and replace human inspectors," said David Leshner, the firm's president. "We trust dogs for bombs, drugs, arson, agriculture--why shouldn't they be trusted for mold?"

Leshner's two dogs, Tootsie and Snickers, have each received 1,000 hours of training and are

certified in mold detection. They are trained to sniff through walls to pinpoint exactly where the mold is. The dogs cost \$15,000 each.

"They are the best piece of equipment I can use," said Leshner, who owns the business along with his sister, Jennifer Leshner. He charges 15 cents per square foot for a dog inspection; follow-up sampling costs \$75 per sample. An inspection of a 5,000-square-foot home recently took the two dogs a total of two hours.

"We were able to pinpoint all through the house where the mold was," Leshner said. "Every time we've done a sample where a dog has alerted, they have never missed once. There has always been mold found." The dogs alert to the smell of mold by sitting down.

About 20 percent of Leshner's clients are home purchasers; the rest are people who already own homes who want to check for mold. He expects his purchaser clients to increase to 80 percent within the next year due to his marketing efforts to brokerage firms.

Leshner claims that the dogs offer advantages over traditional mold testing. "The dogs point with their noses within one foot of where mold is," he said. "Most of the other companies take air samples and then do invasive testing, drilling holes through the walls and taking samples. But before we do our first sample, we already know exactly where in the wall the mold is."

Zachary Jacobs, who lives in Miami, has hired Leshner to do two mold inspections for him. The first time, he had a potential rental house inspected, and it had such high counts that Jacobs decided not to rent it. He also had the dogs inspect a home that he recently purchased.

"The best part about the dogs is that the inspection is quick--you get an instant reaction," Jacobs said. "Besides, they're both totally cute."

Robyn A. Friedman is a freelance writer. E-mail real estate items or tips to rafriedman@att.net.
Copyright © 2003, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)
<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/business/local/sfl-ybreal10nov10,0,2993017.story?coll=sfla-business-front>