

Alaska: Certifying painters
by Jim Morris, Houstin Chronicle

Painting is sometimes called "the carcinogenic trade." Materials used by professional painters -- solvent-bearing enamels, epoxies and thinners, for instance -- can cause cancer as well as painful skin rashes, nerve damage and long-term chemical sensitivity.

About 150 known or suspected cancer-producing chemicals are found in paints and related products. In 1989 the International Agency for Research on Cancer concluded that "occupational exposure as a painter is carcinogenic," based on studies showing a consistent excess of cancer among painters. Some recent studies indicate that even the offspring of painters may be at increased risk of cancer or birth defects.

"We have a terrible, lethal trend in our occupation," said Mike Andrews, director of health and safety for the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades in Washington, D.C.

With this as a backdrop, Alaska passed a law in 1989 requiring that professional painters be certified through a training course. A professional painter is defined as someone who uses potentially hazardous materials for at least 48 hours a month.

Randy Cheap, business manager of Local 1555 of the painters' union in Fairbanks, has been one of the course instructors for five years. He knows firsthand how hazardous the trade can be: Twenty years of solvent exposure have given him "olfactory fatigue," a condition that causes him to lose his sense of smell almost immediately after he encounters an airborne chemical. "That puts me at great risk of exposure, because the body's basic defense systems that warn you of hazards aren't working."

Under Alaska's Hazardous Paint Handlers Certification program, each painter pays an up-front fee of \$250 for 16 hours of instruction. The curriculum includes the identification of hazards and the use of engineering controls, such as ventilation, and protective equipment, such as respirators, rubber gloves and "barrier creams" for the skin.

Painters are given written and practical tests at the end of the course. Most pass, and are certified for three years. They must pay a \$100 licensing fee to Alaska's OSHA, which uses the money for enforcement and other health-and-safety activities. Recertification costs \$225 -- \$125 for the training and \$100 for the state license.

About 2,000 painters have been certified in Alaska. The University of Washington recently surveyed some of them, and most responses were positive, although some complained about the cost and length of the certification course.

Cheap, however, said the cost and inconvenience are minute when compared to, say, the cost and inconvenience of liver cancer or lifelong neurological dysfunction.

It took the Alaska Legislature only one session to

unanimously pass the certification law.

Painter certification has come up, and been shot down, twice in the Texas Legislature. State Rep. Mike Martin, D-Galveston, sponsored the most recent bill in 1993.

"It didn't fly because the contractors in the industry did not want to be subjected to that kind of safety review and opposed it as "another burdensome regulation," said Martin, a candidate for state Senate. He said he's willing to try again if he returns for the 1995 legislative session.

"You've got to train these guys," Martin said. "It'll save lives."

Industrial painter and sandblaster Willie Campbell of Baytown can attest to the need. In the past few years, he said, he's done refinery jobs with the wrong kinds of respirators and no protective clothing. He and his co-workers have gone home covered with paint and silica dust because there were no showers. He's seen men clean their faces and hands with paint thinner. He's seen Hispanic workers suffer severe chemical burns and rashes because they couldn't read product labels in English .

"It was really like a labor camp," Campbell, 35, said of his last big job. "Sometimes they wouldn't even let you take a break. But I had to make a living."