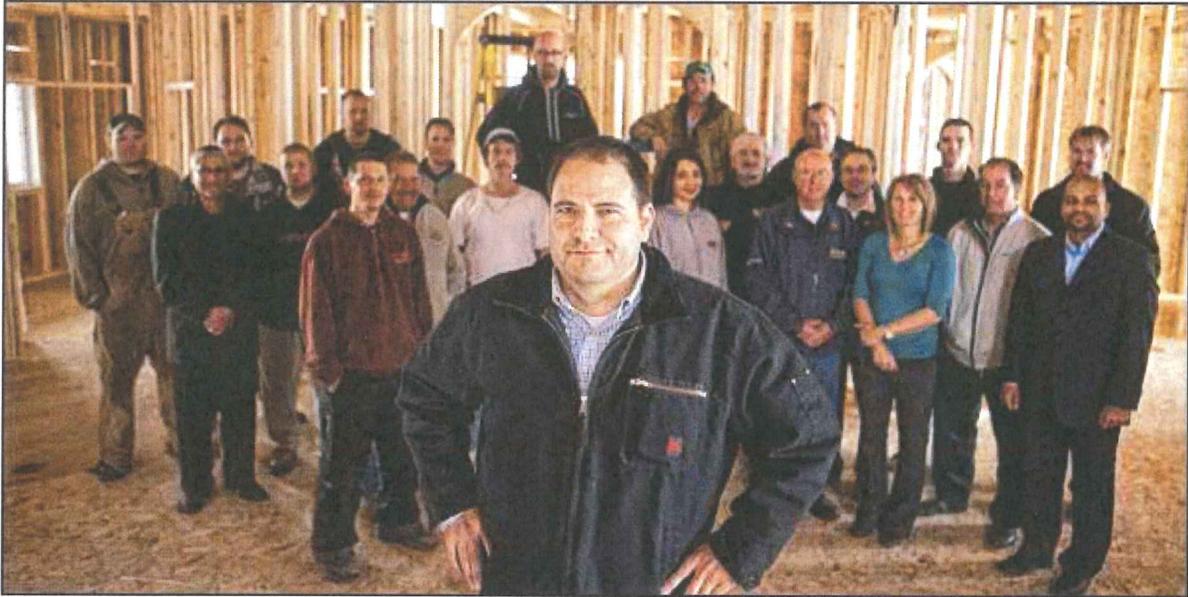


>> PERSPECTIVES



Things change Murray Pound with his Gold Seal staff in Carstairs, Alberta.
(Photo: Courtesy of Gold Seal Homes)

RESIDENTIAL FIRE SPRINKLERS

The Crusader

NFPA Journal®, *January/February 2012*

FROM THE ARCHIVES

November - December 2011

[Learning from mistakes in the design and installation of fire protection systems](#)

September - October 2011

[Paul Dunphy, code compliance coordinator at Harvard University, on how colleges and universities can demonstrate the value of NFPA 3 for commissioning and integrated testing](#)

Gold Seal Homes, founded in 1989, has built the majority of the residences in the Canadian town of Carstairs, Alberta (population 3,500), and recently celebrated the construction of its 300th home. Murray Pound, Gold Seal's vice-president of operations, relishes the accomplishment, but he's more pleased that every home built since the summer of 2008 is safeguarded by residential fire sprinklers.

His company's decision to install sprinklers didn't happen overnight, however. Pound, like most of his peers, had bought into the homebuilding industry's barrage of reasons why sprinklers were bad for business. Only after some investigating and implementation — and a eureka moment — did Pound realize these reasons are unfounded.

Pound is one of the latest additions to [NFPA's Faces of Fire](#), a companion campaign to [NFPA's Fire Sprinkler Initiative](#). NFPA Journal recently talked with Pound about his advocacy efforts, the Canadian viewpoint on sprinklers, and the misconceptions about home fire sprinklers affecting his peers across the globe.

You're a former volunteer firefighter with the Carstairs Fire Department. How did that experience influence your opinion on residential sprinklers?

I responded to a house fire in 1999 that was directly across the street from the home I was living in. It was the middle of winter. The fire had gotten into the garage by the time we got there. The volunteer crew did what they could, but the floor system failed, which meant the crews couldn't make an entry into the home. I'm the builder, and my fellow firefighters are looking at me like, "What did you do wrong when you built this house?" It was never said, but you could see it in their eyes. The house was a total loss. When the fire investigation was completed, we were vindicated. There was nothing we had done wrong.

Every night for a year, I'd come home and see the burnt carcass of this house. This is when I first started investigating fire sprinklers. I initially raised the topic with my father, Brian [Gold Seal Homes' founder]. He said, "You don't want to do that because..." and he gave me the litany of reasons he'd heard over the years. We'd been told by the homebuilding industry and our peers that sprinklers were too expensive, that sprinklers were too difficult to install, that customers didn't want them, that there would be accidental discharges, that insurance companies charge more to insure these homes. So we dismissed sprinklers. It wasn't until I went to the [NFPA Conference & Expo](#) about four years ago that I realized we'd made a big mistake.

July - August 2011

[NFPA's Ken Holland and Laurence Stewart on a proposed standard that would establish essential criteria for new EMS vehicles](#)

May - June 2011

[Chemical Safety Board Chair Rafael Moure-Eraso and investigator Donald Holmstrom on how the CSB and NFPA are working together to address gas-release practices in industrial settings](#)

March - April 2011

[Deborah Boice, the new president of the Society of Fire Protection](#)

January - February 2011

[Glenn Gaines, acting administrator for the U.S. Fire Administration](#)

What did you discover?

There was an education session dispelling the myths of residential fire sprinklers. I walked out of that session, phoned my father, and said, "We have to change our thought process. We need to investigate this." We weren't immediately convinced that it was something we were going to do, but within a month we'd decided to move forward with residential fire sprinklers in all of our homes. Within four months of the conference, we opened up our first home with fire sprinklers. One hundred percent of our homes have been sprinklered ever since.

What are the laws or mandates on the books in Canada governing sprinkler installation?

In Canada, we have a national building code, which is revised every few years. Each province either adopts the code as is or revises it. We also have a provincial building and fire code. The fire code is for occupant or building use, and the building code handles how a structure is constructed. In Alberta, the fire code recommends the use of residential fire sprinklers, but the building code doesn't mandate them. There's a bit of disconnect between the two.

Have sprinkler provisions come close to entering the building code?

Yes, on several occasions. The fire service has put pressure on our province to have them placed in the code. About 11 years ago, there was a big push by the fire chiefs. Two years ago, we had a code revision called High Intensity Residential Fires. What that achieved were code revisions to reduce the effects of residential fires, including proximity issues, minimum spacing between homes, fire-resistant coatings on the sides of homes, and insulating and dry-walling all garages.

Unfortunately, we were spending \$2,000 to \$3,000 insulating and dry-walling garages to prevent fire spread in homes. As we know in the fire industry, there are very few fires originating in the garage that kill occupants. It was my belief that if we were able to spend that money on sprinklers, we'd have better results down the road. Personally, I wouldn't be surprised if we saw a residential sprinkler code provision in our province within the next two years. It's not going to be well received by the building industry.

What's your take on the industry's opinion that sprinklers are expensive and make houses unaffordable? Based on your experience, is that true?

I haven't had one single customer since 2008 say, "No, I don't want to spend the money [on residential sprinklers]." Secondly, I've had previous clients ask me, "Can my house be retrofitted?" or "Why the heck didn't you do this in my home? I would have paid the money." That's what my customers are saying. We position ourselves as the builder that's doing the right thing, building the better home. Even all of our starter homes have residential fire sprinklers. I give potential homebuyers the price — the sprinkler system tends to add \$4,600 to the cost of the home — and ask for their thoughts. I have not had one client say they don't want it.

Have these installations affected your company's bottom line?

I don't think we make any more money because of the sprinklers, but it's increased our visibility and trustworthiness. People maybe feel there's more goodwill over and above another builder. Because we're doing this, there's this implied sense of responsibility. I've noticed there's a more relaxed

atmosphere with our new clients. They already trust a lot of things we say, and we don't have to overcome that initial get-to-know-you phase. They understand the things we're doing.

What about some of the other concerns of homebuilders — difficult installation, accidental sprinkler discharge, and higher insurance rates? What has your experience been?

The perceived difficulty in installing sprinkler systems is probably the largest obstacle. We use an integrated system that is installed by our plumber, which we've successfully introduced to some of our peers. It seems to alleviate the installation concern. Accidental discharges are a widespread myth, and many builders still don't realize that a residential system is not a deluge system — it's activated by heat, not smoke. Regarding higher insurance rates, more and more insurance companies recognize the potential cost-savings associated with sprinkler systems. Many now offer 15 to 40 percent rate reductions.

What about the concern that sprinkler installation should be a matter of consumer choice?

I agree. I think the homeowner should have the option to make a choice. Unfortunately, residential sprinklers aren't promoted as vigorously as granite countertops and fireplaces. If the builders or builders associations were promoting and educating the buyers on the importance of sprinklers, I think it's reasonable to say that the homebuyers could make their own choices.

I would love it if builders and the associations took it upon themselves to educate their buyers. We have smart buyers. They have enough money to pay the mortgage, buy groceries, send their kids to good schools, and buy safe automobiles. Every soccer mom out there researches a car's safety features. We have safety-conscious consumers, we have intelligent consumers. As a homebuilding industry, we're assuming our clients aren't smart enough to make their own choices. Given the proper information, a large majority of our customers would choose residential fire sprinklers. But until the builders' associations push this information, the message is going to be difficult to get through to the buyer.

How do you propose to get more builders on board with sprinklers? What needs to be done?

I talk about residential sprinklers to everyone I meet. I get a lot of rolled eyes. What's interesting now is that I'll go to a homebuilders' meeting or some environment where there's other builders. Almost every single time, someone approaches me and says, "Hey, you're that sprinkler guy. I got a question for you." It's been my mandate for the past four years to be a sprinkler advocate.

Anyone who has a question, anyone who makes a comment on residential fire sprinklers that doesn't sound quite right, I'll go up to them and give them the facts. Sometimes, they're receptive, but most of the time they're not. It's a difficult thing to realize that your convictions are different from 99 percent of everyone else in your industry. Many of my peers still think I'm wrong, but I know I'm not. That conviction is difficult to deal with. It's driven a schism between me and some friends in the industry. It's presented its own challenges because now we're the black sheep of the industry. But I don't mind.

What have been the successes of your efforts?

We've been approached by smaller builders in Alberta. We've worked with about a dozen builders over the past two years to put sprinklers in one-off homes. What I'm really excited about is last year there

was a mid-volume builder in the community of Lethbridge, a smaller city in southern Alberta, that announced it's going to put sprinklers in all of their homes in 2012. We're getting to them bit by bit.

What motivates you to keep fighting?

What's going to happen someday — maybe tomorrow, maybe next year, maybe in five years — is that there's going to be a fire in a Gold Seal home. That fire's going to get extinguished. That's when we're going to be able to tell the entire industry, "I told you so. We saved this customer's house. They have \$5,000 to \$10,000 of water damage, but we saved their lives and property." That's going to be the day when I've done the best job as a fire prevention officer. Even though I'm not a firefighter anymore, I feel I'm doing more for fire prevention now than when I was fighting fires. We're leaving a legacy. These systems will be in the home and protecting people long after I'm gone. That's the legacy of our company.

— Interview conducted by NFPA Journal staff writer Fred Durso, Jr.