



Huff And Puff, But Cement Housing Shrugs Off Winds

*By David Bradley
The Associated Press*

Here's a question for homeowners about to rebuild along the hurricane-shattered Gulf Coast. Why rebuild with standard materials at risk to get swept away when the next storm blows through with a vengeance?

A superior storm-hardy solution might be insulating concrete forms. These reinforced concrete walls can give homeowners a fighting chance when hurricanes muscle a path through Southern states.

Essentially, home builders create walls of concrete sandwiched between two thick panels of polystyrene foam. Holes are cut to accommodate windows and doors. Reinforcing steel is added and the 4- to 10-inch -- or more -- space between the foam panels is then filled with concrete.

John Allen of Southern Construction and Design in Madison, Ala., said the hardened concrete technology is a better option than wooden reconstruction.

"Homeowners need to look at different building technologies that will save lives and offer personal protection," he said.

Allen said insurance companies also might be attracted to this housing approach. "Are you going to fund rebuilding of homes with standard materials that will be hit again?" said Allen.

Some ICF manufacturers said the structures can be built to withstand any "hurricane storm standard." For example, the Florida building code requires such homes with concrete walls to handle wind loads of 130 miles per hour.

According to Allen, homes with "cast in place" walls cost about 5 percent more to erect than a stick-built home. However, the thicker the walls, the greater the cost differential. Manufacturers said the polystyrene forms can be cut and maneuvered to fit virtually any architectural design or floor plan.

Homeowners in warm and colder climates should consider other pluses, too. The nonorganic walls are mold-resistant and won't absorb water. The homes are Energy Star-rated by the

Environmental Protection Agency and can cut energy costs by one-third or more. This can qualify owners for an FHA Energy-Efficient Mortgage. The walls also absorb sound.

ICFs are eco-friendly, too. Aside from energy savings, the forms reduce the need for lumber and no ozone-depleting materials are used. Some portions of the forms are cast from recycled materials, and there is minimal construction waste. Delivery and production costs also are limited.

In many cases, the entire first floor exterior of a home can be built in a single day. The forms are cut with saws and click together.

Information about insulating concrete forms is available at www.eco-block.com.