

WA push to delay national building standards threatens safety and energy efficiency

A Western Australian backflip, delaying implementation of the National Construction Code, will mean new buildings are less safe and less energy efficient than the rest of the country, harming the move to consistent national building standards, according to industry groups.

A coalition of industry groups have condemned the WA decision and called for it to be reconsidered or at the very least, the twelve-month delay shortened.

Using the COVID-19 crisis to justify the decision made no sense, as the industry had begun gearing up for the changes and there are no shortages of suitable construction materials, labour or design capability, a spokesperson for the coalition said.

Aside from allowing the construction of homes and buildings with poorer safety and energy standards, the delay has a potential follow on affect of impacting future running costs and the insurance premiums for the owner that occupy buildings with higher perceived risk and lower performance.

The coalition of groups opposing the delay, include Insulation Australasia, Australian Building Sustainability Association, and the Australian Glass & Window Association.

Implementation of the 2019 National Construction Code had already been delayed for a year with a 12-month transition given to the industry.

A notice to the industry this week, one week out from the twelve-month transition period deadline of 1 May 2020 stated that applicants for building permits would be able to use the standards in the 2016 construction code until 30 April 2021.

The notice stated the delay was “designed to assist the building and construction industry respond during the period of uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and help support the State’s economic recovery”.

James Cross, representing the Australian Building Sustainability Association asked: “How does Covid-19 possibly affect compliance in WA when there are no supply side shortages and the industry had already been given 12 months to transition. All other states have adopted it so what is so special in WA, asks James?

“NCC 2019 dealt with an important loop hole that allowed homes with an energy efficiency level as low as just 2 Star to be built and passed in WA, when 6 Star energy efficiency was the National accepted level of energy efficiency expected in all other states.”

“Be it fire safety, energy efficiency or condensation considerations, it could be a serious error in judgement for any consumer to sign up to build a new home or apartment this year that was not built to NCC 2019, and we call on the Premier to reconsider this delay,” said James.

CEO of Kingspan Insulation and chair of Insulation Australia, Scott Gibson, said there was widespread concern about the WA announcement.

“The new, national code contained significant enhancements to fire safety, condensation management and energy efficiency that are now being delayed, further.”

The broader industry had not been consulted about the decision either which “comes as a shock to many manufacturers, service providers and supply chain distributors that have made changes and geared up with people employed and capacity in place to supply into these changes”, Scott said.

“The delay means less safe, less efficient and less durable buildings will be constructed in WA at a time when the rest of the country will be getting a better build, potentially impacting future insurance premiums and higher operating costs for years to come,” said Scott

Environmental consultant to federal and state governments and national policy advisor on energy efficiency in the construction sector, Alan Pears, said the WA move “looks like a disappointing response by a government that sees these changes as a ‘cost’ rather than a benefit to consumers”.

“It reinforces the outdated ‘economy/jobs versus environment’ tension, which is unfortunate, given that low carbon is typically now most cost-effective.

It just means some short-term cost savings for builders as they do not pay the ongoing energy bills.”

The code includes substantial changes in the non-residential sector, Alan said. “The unfortunate outcome will be that more ‘mid-tier’ commercial buildings will be built that offer poor performance for owners and occupants.

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