Questions & Answers About Fumigation

Department of Consumer Affairs
Structural Pest Control Board

The Structural Pest Control Board (SPCB) licenses and regulates businesses and individuals for pest control. Licensees must meet minimum qualifications and levels of competency to provide safe and effective services to the public. Licenses can be verified online at www.pestboard.ca.gov.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

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DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

What is fumigation?

Fumigation is a method of using a lethal gas to exterminate pests within an enclosed space. There are two fumigation methods used. One is to seal the structure with plastic, tape, or other materials, and the other is to enclose the structure in a tent of vinyl-coated nylon tarpaulins.

How can I tell if my house has been fumigated?

Since 1961, the law requires that, when a fumigation is complete, the fumigator must post a sign with the name of the licensee, the date of the fumigation, and the fumigant used. The sign must be posted either in the attic or in the subarea of a house, such as a garage. The sign must remain permanently attached.

What must be done before a house is fumigated?

All people, pets, and plants must be removed from the structure before fumigation. This includes fish and seeds or bulbs intended for planting. Medicines, feed, and food not sealed in metal, glass, or highly resistant containers must be removed from the structure or sealed in protective bags as recommended by the fumigant manufacturer. Ask your fumigator any questions you have about the process and preparations.

Questions regarding the fumigation process may be directed to your local County Agricultural Commissioner Offi

What information about my house should I give my structural pest control company before fumigation?

Your structural pest control company is required to ask you about the presence of any construction elements, conduits, drains, or vacuum systems that could allow the fumigant to pass from your home to adjacent or adjoining structures.

How long does a fumigation take?

A fumigation can take from six hours to one week depending on the type of infestation, dosage, temperature, size of the structure, and other factors.

What does the fumigant smell like?

Structural fumigants are odorless. Because of that, fumigators are required to release a warning agent such as chloropicrin (tear gas) within the structure when the fumigation begins and throughout the fumigation process.

All people, pets, and plants must be removed from the structure before fumigation.

When drywood termites or wood-boring beetles are found, does the structure always have to be fumigated?

No. Fumigation is not always required for treating drywood termites and wood-boring beetles. Fumigation is an all-encompassing treatment in which the gases permeate the entire structure, eradicating both visible infestations and termites that are otherwise inaccessible.

If only a small area is infested, local applications may be used. The inspector will decide which treatment is necessary. You should be aware that the localized treatments will not eradicate hidden infestations elsewhere in the building.

Will fumigation eliminate all the termites and pests in the structure?

No. Subterranean termites require separate treatments to create a barrier between the structure and their nest in the ground. Under ideal conditions, the target pest will be dead or obviously dying by the end of the fumigation. Drywood termites can remain alive as long as a week after a lethal dose of a fumigant. Lethal doses vary for different pests, depending on the fumigant used.

It is possible for household pests (such as spiders or cockroaches) to survive a fumigation. You may see an increase in ant activity.

NOTE:

Reinfestations of the target pest could occur following a fumigation. Drywood termites and some wood-destroying beetles produce small pellets or dusts that remain in the tunnels after the insects are killed. You may continue to notice these signs after a fumigation. This does not necessarily mean the fumigation failed.

If you have any questions about the success of your treatment, contact your pest control company. Since fumigants have no residual effect, other household pests can reinfest the structure after a fumigation.

How are occupants of a structure told that a fumigation will be done?

Before a structural pest control company applies a fumigant, it must have in its possession an occupant fumigation notice signed by the occupants of a structure or their designated agent. The fumigation notice must state the pest to be controlled, the proposed pesticide or pesticides (including their active ingredients), and the caution statement. This form must state that a lethal gas will be used in the building on specified dates and that it is unsafe to return to the building until a notice of re-entry is posted by the licensee in charge of the fumigation.

The residents of the structure and the owner should receive a copy of the occupant fumigation notice.

How can a consumer find out which fumigants were used on their property?

Before a structural pest control operator applies a fumigant, he or she must inform the owner or owner's agent and the tenants of the fumigants proposed for use and their active ingredients. Also, this notification must alert the occupants to call their physician or poison control center and the pest control company of a reaction after fumigation.

The form should advise consumers to call if anyone entering the structure experiences symptoms of dizziness, nausea, reduced awareness, slowed movement, garbled speech, or difficulty breathing within 24 hours and give any other symptoms of overexposure.

The name of the fumigant used will be entered on the notice of re-entry that will be posted on the door. This is in addition to the fumigation tag, which has the name of the pest control company, date of the fumigation, and the name of the fumigant used. These tags will be permanently affixed in the subarea or attic.

Who can enter a structure while it is being fumigated?

Chemicals used in fumigation are lethal! Exposure to fumigants in a structure being fumigated, even for a few minutes, will result in death or serious injury. Absolutely NO ONE can enter a structure until it has been certified safe for re-entry by the licensee in charge of the fumigation. Warning signs are posted in plainly visible locations on or in the immediate vicinity of all entrances.

To ensure that even the owner or tenant cannot re-enter a structure, the company is required to put a secondary lock on all outside doors that only the company can open. These locks can be any device such as padlock, keyway lock, or deadbolts which will prevent opening by anyone but the licensee in charge.

How will I know when it is safe to enter a home that has just been fumigated?

The fumigator is required to post a re-entry notice on the property when the structure is judged safe for occupancy. The notice states the building is safe for re-entry, and gives the date and time the building was released, the name of the structural pest control company issuing the notice, and its license and phone numbers.

What should I do if I feel sick after a fumigation?

If, within 24 hours after application, you experience headaches, dizziness, nausea, watery eyes, coughing, nose or throat irritation, shortness of breath, double vision, unusual drowsiness, weakness, or tremors, leave the fumigated structure and immediately contact your doctor, poison control center, the structural pest control company, and the Structural Pest Control Board (SPCB) to report the incident.

Your poison control center can be reached at (800) 222-1222. The hotline is answered 24 hours a day, and interpreters are available.

Can a homeowner contract directly with a fumigation company?

Yes, a homeowner can contract with a Branch 1 fumigation company to fumigate by providing a copy of an inspection report which identifies a wood-destroying pest that can be eradicated by fumigation. The Branch 1 company will issue a certification of fumigation to the homeowner and to the pest control company that performed the inspection within five days of the fumigation.

The pest control company that performed the inspection will attach the fumigation certification to any reinspection report, notice of work completed, or certification which it issues.

Are fumigations safe?

Fumigations are highly regulated by the State of California. To perform fumigations, companies must be registered with SPCB. Pest control companies may also be required to notify local fire departments before a fumigation takes place. The California Department of Pesticide Regulation registers all fumigants used in the State and oversees local pesticide use enforcement by agricultural commissioners in each of the State's 58 counties.

If you have any questions about the safety of fumigants, chemicals, or pesticides, you may call your local county agricultural commissioner. You can find the phone number and be directly connected by calling (877) 378-5463 or 87-PestLine.

Are there alternative methods to fumigation?

There are several alternatives for localized chemical treatments. There are, however, only two methods for whole-house eradication of drywood termites: fumigation and whole-house heat treatment. Other methods such as electro gun, microwave, and freezing with liquid nitrogen are local or spot treatments designed to eradicate termites in a specific area.

These methods are not intended for whole house eradication and therefore are NOT alternatives to fumigation. The University of California, Berkeley, conducted a study for SPCB on these methods. A free, condensed version of the study is available on SPCB's Web site, www.pestboard.ca.gov/howdoi/research.shtml.

How can I find out if a company is properly licensed and in good standing?

You can call SPCB's Complaint Unit at (800) 737-8188 to find out if a company is properly registered or if an individual holds a valid license. You can also check the licence on SPCB's Web site at www.pestboard.ca.gov. A history of complaints against licensees during the past two years is also available online.

What can I do if I am not satisfied with the services of a structural pest control company?

If you are unhappy with the service, call the company and discuss your concerns. If the company does not resolve the problem to your satisfaction, you can contact SPCB for assistance. You can also download a complaint form from the SPCB Web site at www.pestboard.ca.gov.

SPCB

STRUCTURAL PEST CONTROL BOARD

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