

'Hotter and faster': owners fear replacement cladding materials will be unsafe

By [Matt O'Sullivan](#)

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Owners of Sydney apartment buildings fear they will be forced to remove materials they use to replace flammable cladding within several years at a large cost because of a lack of state government guidelines about what products are safe to use.

An inquiry also heard concerns from firefighters that there were still cladding products on the market, such as high-pressure laminates, that could allow "fires to burn hotter and faster".

Chris Rumore, who represents owners of a prominent Sydney waterfront building on which cladding has to be removed, said there were no guarantees that the replacement product would be compliant in a year or two given a lack of guidelines from the NSW government.



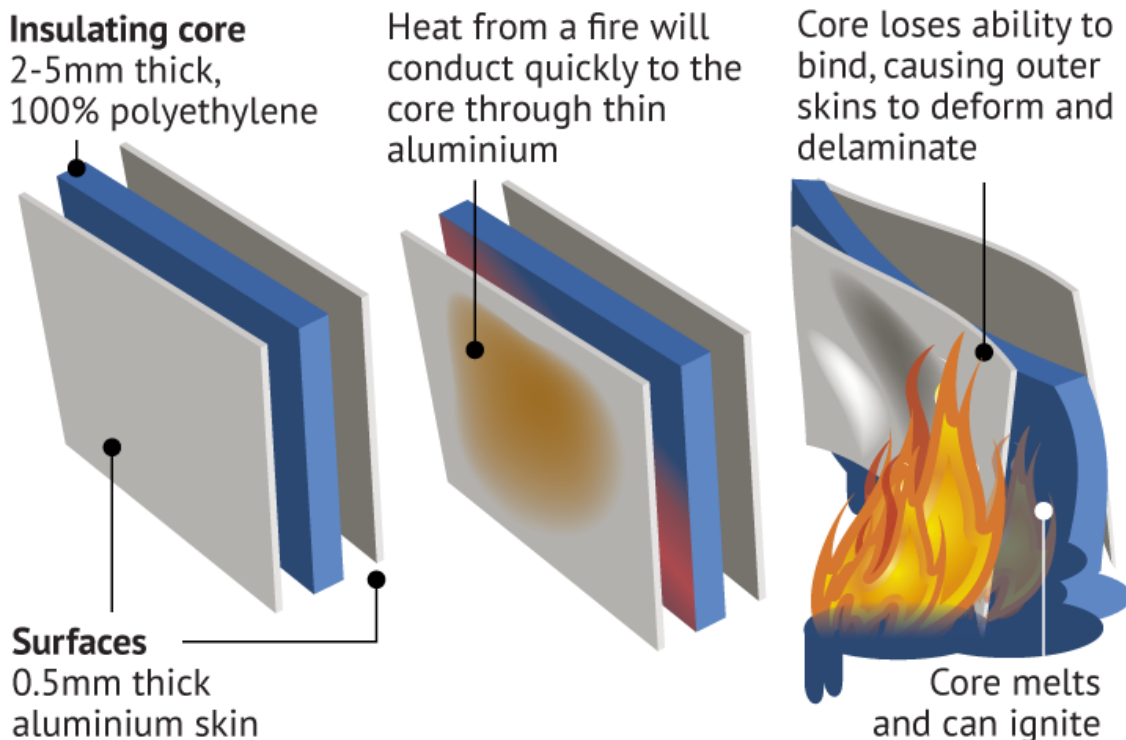
More than 460 buildings across NSW have now been registered as potentially clad in flammable materials. RYAN STUART

"The government hasn't really thought through the problem and how to address it. What we have to replace [the cladding] with is not clear," he told the NSW parliamentary inquiry into building standards. "The advice we are getting is conflicting. We are just in a quandary of what to do."

Mr Rumore said the situation had created "great stress" among residents, who face large special levies to foot a bill of more than \$5 million to replace cladding on his building.

"It is going to be a very long and expensive process," he said. "We are talking about retirees who are panicking about paying special levies ... of \$50,000 on average."

A resident of another building containing cladding, Ravendra Mawjee, said there was no authority that owners could go to for advice about whether products were unsafe. "We have cladding that is almost 90 per cent flammable – we have got to do something," he said.



Insurance Council of Australia's head of risk, Karl Sullivan, agreed there was a lack of clear guidelines about the risk of cladding products, which was a "terrible situation" for property owners.

"There is no clear guidelines of what is high risk, a low risk, and a medium risk," he said.

The Berejiklian government has kept confidential a [list of 463 high-risk buildings across NSW](#) – 271 of which are four storeys or more – potentially clad in flammable material, deeming it a security risk. The number of buildings on the register has risen by 19 in recent weeks.

Strata Community Association president Chris Duggan said he would be concerned about the "premature release" of the register, partly because some buildings had been listed but later found to be compliant.

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Karl Sullivan, Insurance Council of Australia's head of risk

The firefighters' union warned the inquiry that there were a number of products on the market, such as bio-wood and high-pressure laminate cladding, that could enable "fires to burn hotter and faster".

Fire Brigade Employees Union state secretary Leighton Drury said the methodology for determining which buildings should be listed on the register needed to be looked at because it was unlikely to have captured all of the buildings that were at a high risk.

In his two decades as a firefighter, Mr Drury said he was noticing that buildings were burning "faster and faster" because they were made of synthetic materials. "Within minutes, buildings are going up in smoke," he said.

Fires in buildings clad in synthetic materials also posed greater risks to firefighters because the cladding often fell when it caught alight and created "toxic, thick black smoke".

The inquiry heard that there were delays of more than six months for NSW Fire and Rescue to respond to cladding cases referred by councils because of the high level of demands placed on it.

Local government NSW president Linda Scott said the government's cladding support unit, which was set up in September, was also unable to provide technical advice to councils on the composition of panels. Councils believed that the unit was "underfunded and under-resourced".

Cr Scott said properties would need to be re-inspected if more or newer products were banned.

But Engineers Australia is opposed to a blanket ban on cladding products because the risk profile varies depending on where and how they were used in the construction of buildings.



Matt O'Sullivan



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