

## Fire marshal gives circuit breaker warning

(by Daniel O'Keefe - February 13, 2008)



Rutherford's fire marshal, Paul Dansbach, is warning residents to double check their circuit breaker panels and electrical outlets after two electrical fires occurred in town within two months of each other. Both houses employed a brand of circuit breaker panels that has been the subject of safety debates for over 20 years.

The two fires, one on Ayer Place on Nov. 29 and the other on Donaldson Avenue on Jan. 17, were both caused by overheating of the house's fixed wiring. Both houses had Federal Pacific Electric (FPE) circuit breaker panels, a brand that was produced from the 1950s through the mid-1980s. In the case of the Ayer Place fire, the circuit breakers didn't trip in response to the excess current.

In March 1983, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) concluded a two-year investigation into the safety of Federal Pacific

Electric Stab-Lok circuit breakers. The report concluded that there was insufficient reason to issue a recall and that the Commission could not definitely determine that the panels posed a serious risk of injury. The report was initiated when Federal Pacific's parent company reported to the CPSC that many FPE circuit breakers did not fully comply with Underwriters Laboratories, Inc. (UL) requirements.

"While the commission is concerned about the failure of these FPE breakers to meet UL calibration requirements, the Commission is unable at this time to link these failures to the development of a hazardous situation," says the CPSC report. The report stated a full investigation into the safety of these breakers would be too costly for the organization to undertake at the time.

Nevertheless, the company ceased production of circuit panels shortly thereafter. However, millions of these panels are still in homes through out the country. Dansbach, who noted the panels were originally manufactured in Newark, thus making them likely to be prevalent in this area, said the panels could be in homes built between the 50s and 80s and in homes that were renovated during that same time. The Ayer Place home had a Stab-Lok type, the particular model in question.

Lyndhurst fire inspector Mike Antonicelli reinforced Dansbach's message, noting that Lyndhurst had an electrical fire in the attic of a personal home on Valleybrook Avenue shortly before the holidays.

"I know [Federal Pacific Electric] had some problems," said Antonicelli. "We still see [Federal Pacific Electric panels] in homes and businesses. We alert people to have them checked." He said he recommends anyone with that brand of circuit panel get an electrician to inspect it and recommend whether a replacement should be sought.

Robert Moore, Carlstadt's fire inspector, and Robert Kairys, North Arlington's new Fire Department chief, said they too have heard talk of safety concerns regarding Federal Pacific Electric panels. Kairys said he doesn't know of any recent incidents involving the boxes, but that concerns about them are widespread among fire personnel.

"We live in a tremendously electronic-based society and a lot of older homes are not wired for that," said Dansbach. Dansbach noted that Thomas Dunn, a Rutherford firefighter, died in a 1994 fire caused by an electrical cable.

Dansbach said residents should check the brand of their circuit breaker panels. The brand information can be found on the outside cover of the panel or possibly on a paper label on the inside of the cover.

"If a homeowner finds a Federal Pacific Electric Stab-Lok [circuit panel], they should contact a licensed electrician to determine what to do," said Dansbach.

However, regardless of the brand, Dansbach said there are certain precautions residents should take to make sure their electronic equipment operates safely. Dansbach urged residents not to use extension chords and to never overload circuits by running too many devices at one time or plugging in too many devices into one outlet. He noted that if a house's circuit breaker is ever tripped, owners shouldn't just reset the box but call an electrician and determine what caused it to trip first. People should check chords, outlets and circuit breaker panels for any excess heating and call for assistance if they find it. Kairys also emphasized the importance of only purchasing electronics that are UL rated, which means that they have undergone professional safety testing.

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