

Fire Performance in Walls and Ceilings

About Polyiso Insulation

Polyiso is a rigid foam insulation used in more than 70% of commercial roof construction and offers a continuous insulation solution for commercial and residential wall assemblies. As one of North America's most widely used and readily available building products, Polyiso is a cost-effective insulation option for reducing building energy use and improving the overall service-life of roofs and walls.

The benefits of using Polyiso include:

- High R-value per inch of thickness
- Excellent fire test performance
- Extensive building code approvals
- Cost-effective continuous insulation (ci) solution
- Compatible with most roof and wall systems
- Dimensional stability
- Compressive strength
- Moisture resistance
- Thinner walls and roofs with shorter fasteners
- Long service life
- Preferred insurance ratings
- Virtually no global warming potential
- Zero ozone depletion potential
- Recyclable through reuse
- Recycled content (amount varies by product)
- Regional materials (nationwide production network)



Surround yourself with the best.

The Importance of Building Codes in Construction

Building codes are in place to provide a means to safeguard life and protect the public welfare through regulating the design, construction practices, construction material quality (including fire performance), location, occupancy, and maintenance of buildings and structures. When regulating materials, many of the model building codes refer to quality standards developed by standard-setting organizations such as the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). Some building codes and insurance rating organizations also rely on test information from FM Global (FM) and Underwriters Laboratories Inc. (UL).

Foam Plastic Insulation and Building Codes

Sheathing and Wall Applications for Polyiso Insulation

The ICC model building code includes a specific section pertaining to the safe use of foam plastics in construction. For the typical wall application, there are three requirements:

- Flame spread of 75 or less on the foam core, as tested in accordance with ASTM E84
- Smoke development of 450 or less on the foam core, as tested in accordance with ASTM E84
- Use of a thermal barrier, such as 1/2 inch (12.7 mm) gypsum board on the interior or occupied side of the building

ALL POLYISO INSULATION PRODUCTS PRODUCED BY PIMA MEMBERS MEET THESE REQUIREMENTS.

Special Wall Applications for Polyiso Insulation

Building codes have specific requirements for the use of foam insulation in special applications. For example, the need for a thermal barrier may be eliminated if the polyiso insulation product has performed successfully in a large scale fire test at accredited testing laboratories. Consult the polyiso insulation manufacturer for specific test results, code approvals, and recommended exposed applications.

Similarly, some polyiso insulation products have been formulated and tested for use in one and two-hour masonry and wood frame wall constructions. The standard test used to qualify time-rated assemblies is ASTM E119. Consult the polyiso insulation manufacturer and code authorities before installing the product in time-rated constructions.

Fire Tests Definitions

ASTM E84 (Standard Test Method for Surface Burning Characteristics of Building Materials) is a standard method to assess the spread of flame on the surface of a material. Often referred to as the “Tunnel Test,” E84 involves installing a sample of material 20 inches wide and 25 feet long as the ceiling of a horizontal test chamber. The material is exposed to a 4-foot-long gas flame at one end of the tunnel for a period of 10 minutes. The rate of flame front progression on the material is compared to selected standards and calculations are made to produce a flame spread rating. Smoke from the fire in the tunnel is measured in the exhaust stack by using a light beam to evaluate smoke developed ratings. ASTM E84 also has a number of other designations, such as UL 723, NFPA 255, or ICBO 8-1.

Since ASTM E84 is a standard laboratory fire test on a single material, numerical ratings derived from E84 are not intended to reflect hazards presented by the test material under actual fire conditions.

ASTM E84: Polyiso Insulation vs. Polystyrene Insulation

Polyiso insulation, a thermoset material, stays intact during the fire exposure and successfully remains in place during the tunnel test, thereby meeting the necessary ratings dictated by building codes.

Thermoplastic materials, such as polystyrene, perform much differently in the tunnel test. Because the material softens at 165°F and melts at 180°F to 200°F, polystyrene melts away from the fire front and often drips to the floor of the tunnel, where it can continue to burn.

Although many polystyrene insulations claim a flame spread of 5, an examination of a testing laboratory certification label¹ for an extruded polystyrene insulation reveals:

Max. 1-inch thickness
Max. 1.86 pcf density
Unfaced
Flame spread 5**
Smoke developed 115**

Max. 4-inch thickness
Max 4 pcf density
Faced or Unfaced
Flame spread 5++
Smoke developed 165 ++

** Flame spread and smoke developed recorded while material remained in original test position. Ignition of molten residue on the furnace floor resulted from flame travel equivalent to calculated flame spread classification of 45 and smoke developed classification of 350.

++ Flame Spread and Smoke Development recorded while material remained in original test position. Ignition of molten residue on the furnace floor resulted from flame travel equivalent to calculated flame spread classification of 90 and smoke developed classification of over 500.

ASTM E119 (Standard Test Method for Fire Tests of Building Construction and Materials) is used to determine the fire resistance of a complete assembly. For example, a wall rating is measured by constructing a 10-foot by 10-foot section of total wall system: framing, cavity insulation, sheathing, siding, and gypsum wall board. The wall section is installed vertically on a gas furnace, and the wall system is exposed to flame for the time period for which a rating is desired, i.e., one, two, three, or four hours. Failure points during time of fire exposure are as follows: flame penetration through the wall section, an unacceptable temperature increase on the unexposed side of the assembly, and structural failure or collapse of the assembly. Therefore, a one-hour fire resistance rating is taken to mean that a structure incorporating the tested wall construction will not collapse, nor transmit flame or a high temperature, while supporting a design load for at least one hour after a fire starts.

Ceiling constructions can also be tested horizontally in accordance with ASTM E119. The building code authorities usually designate the duration of fire resistance needed in a building. Factors affecting the duration of fire resistance include type of construction, occupancy designations, location of building, and insurance criteria.

ASTM E119 is also known as UL 263, NFPA 251, and UBC 7-1.

1. Underwriters Laboratories Inc. Classification Certificate D-369 for Styrofoam Brand Insulation manufactured by Dow Chemical U.S.A

Testing Laboratories

The testing and evaluation of polyiso insulation to show conformance with building code requirements is conducted by several nationally recognized testing agencies accredited by ICC or state or local code authorities.

ABOUT PIMA

Since 1987, PIMA has served as the voice of the North American rigid polyiso insulation industry. PIMA is a leading advocate for safe, cost-effective, sustainable, and energy-efficient construction. The Association is comprised of polyiso manufacturers and industry suppliers, and represents the public policy interests of its membership at the local, national, and international levels to advance high-performance building practices.

PIMA produces technical bulletins to address key topics related to polyiso insulation. These publications inform architects, specifiers, and contractors about the performance characteristics of polyiso insulation. Always consult individual manufacturers for product specific information, including product data sheets and installation instructions.

For more information on polyisocyanurate insulation, visit www.polyiso.org

