

# Moldy records: Hype or hazard?

By Bob Johnson, NAID CEO

Is mold in wet paper records a problem? Paper records get wet. It happens more than you might think. Sometimes, file boxes that are stored in the lowest rent portions of the building, usually dank and dark, get wet. Maybe there was a plumbing leak. Maybe there was a flood, hurricane, or leaky roof. And, when office and storage buildings catch fire, sprinklers and firemen with water hoses often target records storage areas since they represent the most fuel. Even a dank old basement can make stored records wet to a degree. The point is that paper records have many occasions to get wet in a number of ways.

Deep inside any stack of wet paper, boxed or not, it is dark and warm, which creates optimal conditions for the growth of mold. In the last few years, mold has become one of the most feared and least understood health hazards out there. It has caused people to level perfectly good homes. It has spawned personal injury lawsuits. And, it has caused insurance underwriters to exclude damage from mold and mold-remediation from home insurance policies.

So it is a quite logical that when document destruction companies are faced with the destruction of paper that is or was recently wet, they are concerned about the welfare of employees, health code violations, and future personal injury claims or regulatory penalties.

## What's the big deal?

Mold is part of the natural environment. It is a type of fungi found everywhere – inside and outside – throughout the year. There are about 1,000 species of mold found in the United States and 100,000 known species worldwide.

Mold grows on almost any substance, as long as moisture, oxygen, and an organic source are present. Mold affects everything around it because when mold produces tiny spores (i.e., viable seeds) that usually cannot be seen without magnification. Mold spores continually float in the air, both indoors and outdoors.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website, “Currently, there are no federal standards or recommendations (e.g., OSHA, NIOSH, and EPA) for airborne concentrations of mold or mold spores.”

Typically, most indoor air exposures to mold do not present an adverse risk to a person's health; however, some can produce allergens, which are substances that cause allergic reactions. The onset of allergic reactions to mold can be either immediate or delayed. Allergic responses include hay fever-type symptoms such as runny nose and red eyes.

Mold may cause localized skin or mucosal infections but, in general, it does not cause systemic infections in humans, except for persons with impaired immunity, AIDS, uncontrolled diabetes, or those taking immune suppressive drugs. Also, mold can cause asthma attacks in some individuals who are allergic. In addition, exposure to mold can irritate the eyes, skin, nose and throat in certain individuals. Symptoms other than allergic and irritant types are not commonly reported as a result of inhaling mold in the indoor environment.

## Handling wet records

In the life of every secure destruction company, the call to remove wet records will come. The first question should be: How wet? The second question is: How long have they been wet?

The reason for knowing how wet they are is pretty obvious. If they are dripping wet, there are probably have more logistical issues than health issues. Moving and destroying soaking wet paper presents many challenges that would make a great subject of discussion on its own.

But, as to the issue at hand, namely destroying mold-laden paper, the duration is more relevant. Soaking wet paper most likely got that way in a recent event where mold has not had the opportunity to take hold. On the other hand, damp paper that was exposed to damp conditions over a long period of time or was dried out is more likely to have mold issues. A notable exception to this rule is when records are soaking wet because they were exposed to flood waters or sewage overflows. Those records would have extremely rough logistical and health issues.

To be clear, if the records were ever wet, it is pretty much the same risk as if they are currently wet. According to OSHA, the risk is virtually the same "since the chemicals and proteins, which can cause a reaction in humans, are present even in dead mold."

### **How to treat moldy records**

Disaster recovery experts suggest you approach projects involving potentially mold-laden paper the same way you would approach any mold remediation issue. The truth is that even if mold has begun to grown in the paper, it is highly unlikely that toxic molds are present. The problem is, however, in the remote chance they are present, there are serious ramifications to the health of those handling them.

According to Beth Lindblom Patkus of the Northeast Document Preservation Center in Andover, Mass., a mycologist should be consulted to insure that no toxic mold species are present. She said local hospitals and health departments can provide references of companies that do field tests for the presence of such toxic molds. If the wet or damp materials do contain toxic mold, your work is done unless you are in the business of cleaning up biohazard waste.

If you have established that the materials do not contain toxic mold, it is safe to arm healthy individuals to process the materials. Under no circumstances should employees with AIDS, uncontrolled diabetes, or those taking immune suppressive drugs be exposed or allowed to process the materials. In addition, consideration may be given to employees with allergic reactions to airborne substances.

It is advised that even healthy employees sent into these circumstances need to wear a protective air filter. OSHA recommends personnel "be equipped with respiratory protection (e.g., N-95 disposable respirator). Respirators must be used in accordance with the OSHA respiratory protection standard (29 CFR 1910.134). Gloves and eye protection should be worn."

Also, avoid eating, drinking, and using tobacco products and cosmetics where mold remediation is taking place. This will prevent unnecessary contamination of food, beverages, cosmetics, and tobacco products by mold and other harmful substances within the work area.

### **Loading and transporting**

The trick to removing the materials from storage is to minimize exposure. To effectively isolate the wet materials, plastic bags can be used to seal it up. Alternatively, if mobile containers have lids that seal tightly, bagging may be unnecessary. In that case, both to minimize health concerns and customer peace of mind, the materials should not be carried unprotected through an area where it could be exposed to the clients and employees.

## **Destruction**

Most information destruction equipment is not effective in destroying wet paper. Therefore, if it is still wet, it must be land-filled, incinerated or left until it is dry.

With dry material, there are fewer restrictions on how the materials can be destroyed, but there is no less judgment required in making the decision on how to proceed. Factors that service providers may want to consider are the amount of the material, whether they have air cleaning capability (and their faith in it), the extent and duration of the materials that were exposed to the mold-creating environment, and whether there is a capability to isolate the destroyed materials from the other materials that are stored for eventual recycling.

In case there was any doubt, it is not likely that the destruction process itself will appreciably change the mold or mold-remnants that were originally in the materials. They will, however, significantly increase the likelihood of their aerosol distribution. Employees in the immediate area of the processing plant, therefore, should also be equipped with the same gear as those who removed the material from their original dwelling.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

Many information service providers will steer clear of any situation that even hints of a health hazard. Of course, everyone has their own tolerance for dealing with any suggestion of additional liability. In reality, however, given the lack of conclusive evidence of a link between non-toxic mold and health problems, some may view it as an opportunity to offer a value-added service. For the record, NAID is not aware of mold-related health claims against any information destruction company, stemming from the destruction of wet, or previously wet, paper media.

## **What clients need to know**

As a service to clients, they need to be aware when they may have an additional health-related liability when disposing of certain materials. Secure destruction companies that are prepared to address that liability by having the right personal safety equipment on hand, may find themselves in a good position to better capitalize on their concerns.

Being ready with the right precautions, answers, systems, trained employees and safety equipment, could turn out to be profitable occasionally and an interesting point of differentiation. That is not to say that everyone is going to get rich because they are ready and able to take on such projects. It is more likely to be a tool that prevents others from serving your existing clients or as a way to earn an account. Keep in mind that in order to help a client dispose of wet or "once wet" materials, you may need permission to deviate from normal procedures as well as agree to release your firm of the liability for such deviation. This agreement should be arranged up front and with the advice of legal counsel.