

Yukon to exempt log homes from energy efficiency rules

Jacqueline Ronson Friday January 16, 2015

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The Yukon government has agreed that log homes should be exempt from energy efficiency building standards, if they are built with solid timber that is at least eight inches thick, or with logs of at least 10 inches in diameter.

Yukon plans to amend energy efficiency building rules to make it easier for people who want to live in log homes in the territory.

The government is working towards implementing the new National Building Code of Canada.

Last fall a committee of stakeholders met to see if any changes should be those rules, to effect the local needs and realities.

Last week the government announced that it has accepted most of the committee's recommendations, including those that would make it easier to build log homes.

"These standards will make it easier for rural homesteaders to continue that practice," said Dennis Berry, Yukon's fire marshal, who chaired the committee.

“People generally, when they build a log home on their property with their own wood, they’re not building a 4,000 square-foot log home like you might see in Canmore, with 36-inch logs. Here people are building a 400 square-foot cabin as part of their traditional property and those sorts of things.”

The new rules would exempt log homes from energy efficiency requirements if they are made of solid timber at least eight inches thick, or of logs of a diameter of at least 10 inches.

Other recommendations that the government accepted include exempting buildings with less than 480 square feet of living space, and buildings that are never heated or occasionally heated.

The government needs to develop specific regulations before the provisions for energy efficiency in the new building code will come into effect.

Dave Loeks sells solid timber home building kits through his company, Heartland Timber Homes. He's very happy with the government's decision to make an exception for solid timber buildings.

“It’s really pleasant to have an instance where government has listened and responded in a way that suits a lot of people,” said Loeks.

The way building codes are designed doesn’t reflect the realities of different building technologies, he said.

“The code was really designed around modern conventional building - fiberglass or foam insulation, something like that, which relies on R-value.”

R-value is a way of describing the insulating properties of a material.

But when it comes to describing the energy efficiency of a building overall, R-value doesn’t do a terribly good job when it comes to solid timber construction, said Loeks.

“There are other energy, physical characteristics going on, that aren’t really well understood, that boost the energy performance in a way that isn’t captured by focusing on R-values. And the code is focused on R-values, it’s all they really know how to talk about.”

“Many people in the solid timber business thought that the people who are making codes were making policy based on guesswork and modelling, not actual data.”

His own solid timber home is more comfortable than other types of structures, requires less maintenance and is not more expensive to heat, he said.

There are many other benefits to solid timber that merit special consideration, too, said Loeks.

“The environmental footprint of solid wood is a fraction of any other building technology going. In fact you could argue that you ought to give solid timber a free pass on almost everything on that alone.”

And the aspects of heritage, culture and consumer choice are worthy of preservation, he said.

“This has been part of Canada’s architectural and lifestyle culture for centuries.

“This takes a huge question mark off the minds at least of solid timber people building in the Yukon.

“The main thing it means for me, is I don’t have to be looking forward with a sense of anxiety, of ‘My God what are these people going to do to us next?’”

Loeks will be encouraging industry organizations in other jurisdictions to lobby their governments to follow the Yukon’s lead, he said.

“If we can do this up here, with the climate we have, it’s a lot easier farther south.”

Contact Jacqueline Ronson at

jronson@yukon-news.com

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