

Where the mould grows

Maureen Atleo's abandoned house on the Ahousat Reserve is one of 45 buildings condemned because of an invasive black mould sprouting from walls and floors. And still the government and the Ahousat band bicker over who's responsible for finding a solution

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AHOUSAT, B.C. — Maureen Atleo's house at 733 Ahousat Reserve stands empty now, except for the mould covering the walls and windows, the abandoned possessions, and the memories of a dead infant son.

"Every room has mould in it," said Ms. Atleo, a wife and mother of six. "It's strong, kind of like a musty smell."

Downstairs, mould stains the inside surface of the back door and invades the drywall. In the laundry room — down the hall, past a former mushroom patch — mould blackens the corners. Upstairs, it dirties the living-room windows. The scene is repeated in the master bedroom, where Ms. Atleo's nearly seven-month-old son died from sudden infant death syndrome in 2001.

"It's given us headaches. My children have asthma. We've lost a son. He died of SIDS when we lived in this house. It's affected us dearly," she said — although there's no proven link between mould and SIDS.



Maureen Atleo stands in the doorway of her abandoned home, where damp possessions litter the floor and mould lines the walls. (*John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail*)

The Globe's John Lehmann portrays the plight of the First Nations of Ahousat, B.C. who fighting deadly mould that has taken over their homes

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The Atleos' house may be one of the newest in Ahousat, but it's not unique. Community leaders say of 144 local homes, mould affects about 100, and some 45 of those are now condemned.

Just who's responsible for the problem? "It's one of those things where Joe blames Bill and Bill blames Bob and nothing gets done and that's where we're at," said John Frank, deputy chief of the Ahousaht First Nation.

Federal agencies — Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and Health Canada — say the band is responsible for home construction, administration and maintenance. Ahousaht leaders argue the government should shoulder some blame. They say better economic conditions would help solve the problem.

Home for the Ahousaht is a pristine, wet and isolated island off Vancouver Island's central west coast. Flores Island is located halfway between Tofino and Estevan Point, and in the middle of the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

To the east, Pacific swells pummel the island's coastline. To the west, mountains — blanketed by a lush cover of old- and second-growth trees — rise from the black waters of the sound. Access is possible only by plane or water taxi. Environment Canada says an annual average 3,176.9 millimetres and 3,257.4 millimetres of precipitation fall on Estevan Point and Tofino respectively.

In this wet and isolated community, overcrowded houses are an issue. According to the 2006 census, 661 residents live in Ahousat, although Mr. Frank said the population is more like 900 year-round and 1,400 in the summer. The majority of the 144 houses were built in the 1960s with Indian Affairs funding; 27 were built between 1989 and 2004 with the help of CMHC.

"We have a family of 16 living in a three-bedroom home," Mr. Frank said. "We have a family of 12 living in a two-bedroom home." With membership growing by 25 to 30 people a year, Mr. Frank said the band needs another 300 units.

It's not surprising, then, that mould has become a problem in Ahousat. Karen Bartlett, associate professor of environmental health at the University of British Columbia, said microscopic mould spores require only oxygen, a nutrient source and moisture to grow.

Moisture, she added, can come from several inside and outside sources: shower condensation, cooking, plumbing problems and basement leaks, especially if the house sits on a high water table. Once present, she said, mould can cause asthma, coughing, bronchitis, itchy and irritated eyes, runny noses and blocked sinuses. As for any link between mould and SIDS, she said: "There just isn't enough evidence to say mould can cause it."

Mould was present inside 733 Ahousat Reserve long before it became Ms. Atleo's home. Invited by her aunt, Ms. Atleo moved her family into the house in 2000, only to find mushrooms growing around the base of the upstairs toilet.

Months later, on April 14, 2001, Ms. Atleo's infant son died. A health assessment followed, and Ms. Atleo said she washed the mould with soap and water — as directed by nurses. "But it always came back," she said.

Their health problems continued. "My husband and my children are all asthmatic and several have been hospitalized due to the chronic breathing problems, and they all suffer with allergies." When it rained the house leaked, and a patch of mushrooms sprouted in the downstairs hall.

Moving out wasn't easy. Ms. Atleo said she had to speak to the band's housing manager; then, nurses and doctors assessed the mould. Once officials decreed the house uninhabitable, the family waited about nine months, until December, 2007, for a transitional home down the street, funded by Indian Affairs.

QUESTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

"We want them to have the control over what's going on in their community," said Jeff Loucks, BC regional director general for Indian Affairs. "We don't micromanage."

Mr. Loucks said that while Indian Affairs funds homes, the band must decide where the money goes and manage day-to-day operations, such as tendering projects, obtaining quotes and finding contractors. Since 2002, he said, Ahousat has received \$3.7-million for housing, and of that \$1.6-million went to mould remediation.

Kevin Lowe, an Indian Affairs spokesman, said the band has the same housing responsibilities now as it did in the 1960s, and while the building standards of the time were different, the houses were still built to code. He said the 1960s-era houses were erected by a variety of contractors; he didn't identify them.

Like Indian Affairs, CMHC says Ahousat is responsible for housing decisions. Line Gullison, CMHC's manager of aboriginal housing for B.C., said it has helped Ahousat by financing 27 homes, of which 21 were built between 1989 and 1993 and six in 2004. But she said the band was responsible for selecting building contractors and ensuring the homes met a national code, as well as maintaining them.

Calling in environmental health officers and building inspectors to assess homes is Ahousat's responsibility too, said Paul Spendlove, a Health Canada spokesman. He said the band must contact his department with a list of homes requiring inspection. Environmental health officers then document health and safety concerns — indoor air quality, tobacco smoke, overcrowding, wood smoke, pets — and visible mould.

"Health Canada does not make the decision to remediate," he said. "Health Canada reports to First Nations authorities the extent of the problem. Chief and council, as leaders of the

community, seek funding sources for remediation based partly on environmental health officer inspection reports." He said since 2000, environmental health officers have inspected 134 homes; the last inspection took place in February, 2008.

CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

The Ahousaht take another view. "They're always going to put the blame on First Nations," Mr. Frank said. "They're constantly trying to wash their hands of the responsibilities they have."

Mr. Frank confirmed Indian Affairs has spent \$1.6-million on mould remediation since 2005, but he said studies ate up a big chunk. His own home, he said, underwent three mould studies, and he argued the band could complete the same studies for less.

Mr. Frank also challenged the federal government on who was responsible for building the homes. He said Indian Affairs and CMHC helped decide where to build and even the method of construction. "They brought in plans. They told us that we needed carpenters that were certified to build these homes so that we wouldn't be running into problems in the future. But we had them [carpenters] come in, they did the job that needed to be done, but lo and behold, 15 years later, we've got the same issue."

Mr. Frank also criticized the materials, such as fir and spruce, used in home construction. "At one time our community was built with cedar. Every home was built with cedar. We never had a mould problem." When asked who built the homes, Mr. Frank said "some shady companies."

He said the band could fix its mould problem if it had more economic independence and if it could expand its reserve. In the 1990s, band members could pay for their own homes because they had jobs in the fishing and forest industries. But those industries collapsed, Mr. Frank said, and members couldn't make payments.

He said the band's administration was forced to take over because it was the guarantor, and is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars of its annual budget on housing. It's hard for members to secure home loans for upgrades because many have little or no collateral, he said. Under the current structure too, land is held in trust by hereditary chiefs.

Homes, however, can be owned by individuals. Mr. Frank said that, too, is a problem for banks. "I could have the finest financing I wanted, but once they find out I'm going to build it on reserve, they say, 'whoop,' because they can't come take the home from me."

The situation is getting better, though. Mr. Frank said band members are finding work with fish farms, logging companies, tourism operators and a mining company looking for copper in a local mountain. The unemployment rate is now between 40 and 50 per cent, he said, down from as high as 70 per cent in 1993. Meantime, Mr. Frank said the band has waited more than a decade for the government to transfer an adjacent lot for a community expansion.

Ms. Atleo's transition house at 730 Ahousat Reserve is full now.

The smell of baked cakes, not toxic mould, fills the two-storey home, which boasts four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a spacious kitchen and comfortable living room. There is no sign of mould or mushrooms, and the only stains on her walls were made by her children. "There's fingerprints," she said.

Her family's health has improved: "When our children are sick, they aren't sick for like weeks on end." What will become of her old home? Ms. Atleo doesn't know. It could be renovated, or demolished. But for now, she's grateful.

"It feels really good to be a part of the process of mould remediation," she said. "We couldn't have asked for anything more."