

Submission

To

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment,
Communications and the Arts**

on

Inquiry into the Energy Efficiency Homes Package

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BACKGROUND

1. Master Electricians Australia (MEA) is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Electrical and Communications Association and is the peak industry body for contractors who operate in the electrical, data, communications and fire sector of the Building and Construction and domestic services industry throughout Australia.
2. The Electrical and Communications Association has been active for more than 70 years, and is one of the longest-standing industry associations of its kind. It has more than 2,000 members.
3. MEA works to raise the standard of electrical safety in Australia by creating consumer awareness and demand for electricians who meet the highest standards.
4. Master Electricians are accredited to deliver the highest standards of electrical safety, quality, energy efficiency advice, and integrity. To become a Master Electrician a contractor must;
 - demonstrate an active safety management system
 - adopt a quality management system that ensures a high level of service quality for customers, and back this up with a 12-month workmanship guarantee
 - demonstrate a commitment to providing customers with energy-efficiency options
 - abide by the Master Electricians Code of Ethics
5. Contractors who gain Master Electricians Accreditation will create a safer working environment for their employees.
6. The enforcement of quality and safety standards through the Master Electricians program can be expected to ease the load on some government regulatory bodies and consumer complaints organisations.
7. MEA is appreciative of the opportunity to submit its views to the Committee, and while it is mindful of the fact that the Committee is investigating a wide range of issues concerned with the Energy Efficient Homes Package, MEA is not in a position to make comments on all of the issues outlined in the Terms of Reference.
8. As such ECA's submission will focus solely on the Terms of Reference point iii, part B *an examination of what advice was provided to the Government on safety matters, particularly in relation to fire and electrocution risks and to what degree the Government acted on this advice.*

MEA SUBMISSION

9. From the outset it needs to be understood that both Master Electricians Australia and the Electrical and Communications Association were supportive of the Energy Efficient Homes Package established by the government.
10. The sole concern MEA had with the program was the sudden and large influx of unskilled installers the package would encourage. This encouragement would come from the steep increase in demand for insulation, and the belief by some to “make a quick buck” by getting on the insulation bandwagon.
11. MEA knew from its more than 70 years representing the electrical contracting industry that if you combined unskilled labor with electrical cabling then tragedy would not be far away.
12. MEA’s concerns came from the installation of two types of insulation. Metal based insulation such as foil and woolen insulation such as batts.
13. The incorrect installation of either of these products (both covered under the rebate scheme) could lead to serious damage to lives and property.
14. As early as 18th May 2009, some six weeks before the Home Insulation Program was rolled out, MEA issued a media release warning of the dangers of house fires being caused by the incorrect installation of woolen batts. Batts installed too close to light fittings (and in breach of building codes) creates a situation whereby the intense heat generated by the lights cannot escape, and ceiling dust and debris can then spark a fire.
15. Metal based insulation also has the potential to cause significant damage and injury if not correctly installed. This was unfortunately proven to be correct when an installer was electrocuted on 14th October 2009 while working in a ceiling space.
16. For the few months leading up to October 2009, MEA had been receiving more and more complaints from members who were arriving to undertake work at houses that had recently had foil insulation installed and found the roof to be “live”. This was caused by the foil insulation being stapled (with metal fasteners) to the trusses of the roof and through electrical cables, causing the entire area of the foil insulation to become live, and potentially deadly.
17. The potential for the loss of life or severe injury was not just contained to the electrical contractor but anyone who ventured into the ceiling space at any time over the life of the building.
18. On 16th October 2009 MEA called for the immediate withdrawal of the rebate from metal based insulation products. At the same time it set about working closely with the government to find a safe way forward.
19. In addition to the withdrawal of the rebate on metal based insulation products, MEA also called for far greater training for installers on the correct installation techniques when working around electrical cables, and the correct procedure for undertaking an electrical risk assessment. Up until this stage the training was scant to nonexistent for most installers, and as there were many new entrants into the market very few had experience to fall back on.
20. MEA also sought electrical safety inspections for houses which had had metal based insulation installed to ensure these houses were safe.

21. On 30th November 2009 the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts issued a Media Release stating that increased training and formal risk assessments would be mandated immediately for those working in the insulation industry. These changes were made as a direct result of MEA's push to get electrical safety to the forefront of the insulation industry and from our willingness to work with the government to ensure that the industry was made safe not only for the people working in it, but for the home owners as well.
22. MEA has attached copies of some of its media releases for the Committee's information.

MEA CONTACTS

23. Master Electricians Australia would like to thank the Senate Committee for the opportunity to tender its submission to the Inquiry into the Energy Efficient Homes Package.
24. Should the Committee have any queries on any issues raised in this submission please contact either Mr Paul Daly 07 3251 2444

Media release

18 May, 2009



Insulation scheme prompts timely fire safety warning

Home owners are being urged to be fire conscious as they take up the Federal Government's home insulation rebate in coming months.

The rebate scheme is expected to generate significant demand for home insulation, prompting Master Electricians Australia to warn of the dangers of using shonky or inexperienced installers.

Master Electricians chief executive officer Malcolm Richards said incorrectly installed insulation created a very serious fire risk, especially in older homes.

"Residents should check that their insulation providers understand the fire danger and how to install the insulation safely," Mr Richards said.

"House fires can easily start in ceilings where insulation is installed too close to light fittings. The heat from ceiling lights cannot escape if insulation is laid incorrectly, and ceiling dust and debris can then spark a fire."

Dichroic and low voltage lights were the most dangerous as they generate the most heat. Mr Richards said providers should be working around existing electrical infrastructure, being careful not to disrupt it as they lay the insulation.

"The most important thing is that the installers keep a good separation between the light fittings and the insulation. There have been examples of older houses being burnt down because insulation has been installed after an electrician has safely installed the lighting.

"If residents are not sure the insulation has been installed correctly they should contact a Master Electrician who can check the configuration of the insulation and lighting in their ceilings is electrically sound."

The Homeowner Insulation Program will be rolled out from July 1, 2009 providing up to \$1600 for insulation installation.

"Those homeowners planning on claiming the rebate should not cut costs when choosing an insulation provider but instead select a quality and skilled tradesman."

Master Electricians are all experienced electrical contractors who complete a stringent, annual safety and quality audit, adhere to a code of practice, and offer customers a 12-month guarantee on their work.

For more information visit www.masterelectricians.com.au.

Media contact: David Melloy, Executive Manager Marketing 1300 889 198.

MEDIA RELEASE



16 October, 2009

Insulation death should prompt immediate policy change

The Federal Government must immediately withdraw its rebate for metal insulation products following Wednesday's death of an installer on Brisbane's south side, Master Electricians Australia said today.

The Queensland Electrical Safety Office has reported an installer was electrocuted while installing metal insulation in a home. While investigations are ongoing, the ESO believes a staple use to fix foil insulation pierced an electrical cable.

Master Electricians CEO Malcolm Richards said the Federal Government should act immediately to ensure this tragedy was not repeated.

"The government must withdraw the \$1600 rebate from metal-based insulation products. These products simply are not safe," he said.

"Metal sarking or insulation blankets with foil layers are usually laid directly over electrical cables. Once they are laid, it's impossible to judge where the cables are located when the products are being stapled into place.

"Master Electricians Australia has been warning since May of the safety risk associated with the surge in demand for roof insulation associated with the government rebate.

"This massive demand has meant that traditional products such as batts or spray-in insulation have been in short supply, and new installers have turned to other products, including metal foils and blankets.

"From an electrical point of view it is highly dangerous to lay products over cables and staple them in place, as these metal types of insulation require."

Master Electricians has also expressed concern that the rebate program has attracted a large number of new installers who, while registered with the government scheme, are not trained or experienced in dealing with the electrical safety issues associated with laying insulation.

"Across the country, our members have been reporting an increase in repair jobs as a result of poor service providers installing insulation," he said.

"As well as the electrocution risk, poorly installed insulation can also pose a fire risk if it is laid too close to down lights.

"The heat from ceiling lights cannot escape if insulation is laid incorrectly, and ceiling dust and debris can then spark a fire."

Mr Richards urged homeowners to select qualified and experienced tradespeople to reduce the risk of fire or electrocution.

“Homeowners should avoid cost-cutting, as unskilled work can lead to further costs in repair and maintenance.”

“And if you are unsure the insulation has been installed correctly, contact a Master Electrician to test that electrical cabling hasn’t been compromised during the installation, and that the work complies with fire safety standards.”

For more information visit www.masterelectricians.com.au.

Malcolm Richards is available for interviews.

Contact David Melloy, Executive Manager Marketing on 1300 889 198.



MEDIA RELEASE

1 November, 2009

Peak electrical body welcomes decision on foil insulation

Master Electricians Australia has welcomed today's announcement by the Federal Government that it will withdraw the insulation rebate for foil products held in place with staples or other metal fasteners.

Master Electricians CEO Malcolm Richards said the decision significantly reduces the risk of death or serious injury as a result of laying metal-based insulation products over electrical cables.

The decision to withdraw the rebate when metal fasteners are used followed discussions between Master Electricians, the Federal Government and the insulation industry in Canberra last week.

State regulatory bodies have also issued advice banning the use of metal fasteners, even where work is not associated with the Federal Government's rebate program.

"This is a very good outcome, and it will significantly reduce the risk of death or serious injury associated with installing this type of product," Mr Richards said.

"We thank the government and Mr Garrett for taking our concerns seriously and responding to them so quickly."

Mr Richards said Master Electricians also supported the commitment from the Government that it would require covers to be placed over light fittings when any type of insulation was being installed.

"This decision by the Minister will cut the chances of fires starting in roof spaces due to insulation being fitted too close to electrical fittings. It will mean that use of this product under the national rebate scheme will now exceed the national standard for electrical safety."

Mr Richards urged homeowners who have had foil-type insulation products installed in their roofs to call a Master Electrician or licensed electrical contractor to check the work.

"Under no circumstances should home owners go into the roof space themselves. There is a very real risk of injury or death if this foil is touching an electrical fitting. Don't risk your safety – have it checked by an expert."

For more information visit www.masterelectricians.com.au.

Malcolm Richards is available for interviews.

Contact Malcolm Cole on 0408 612 603