

International Fire Sprinkler Opportunity Update

The Outlook for 2016

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In 2010 I authored an article for *Sprinkler Age* regarding international opportunities for American Fire Sprinkler Association (AFSA) contractors. As you recall, at the beginning of 2010 we were in the midst of the economic crisis that is referred to as the “Great Recession.” I wrote of the increasing awareness, use, and adoption of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards around the globe along with the growth of United States-based insurance companies in new international markets.

Here we are six years later and the use of sprinklers as a principle part of the fire- and life-safety protection strategy continues to grow. In fact, statistics show that more sprinklers are now installed internationally than in the United States. However, this is a “good news, bad news” scenario. The rapid increase in the use of sprinklers has created problems including the use of “unlisted” or “certified” system components and a severe shortage of trained system design and installation technicians.

I have witnessed firsthand the use of counterfeit sprinklers. Last year I toured a 40-story luxury condominium building in a major Central American city. It was constructed by a widely known United States developer that specializes in high-end properties. The sales price for units in the building ranged from a half million to several million dollars. I was pleasantly surprised to see that it was a completely sprinklered facility, but was dismayed to find counterfeit sprinklers used in the residential units.

In addition, I continually find properties where the correct components are

supplied but are used or installed inappropriately. When I travel internationally, I look for and book my stay at hotels that are protected with fire sprinklers. Imagine the shock when I walked into the lobby of a world-class hotel in Saudi Arabia to find all of the sprinklers in the lobby, meeting rooms, and other common areas to be upright sprinklers installed in the pendent position. This is not an infrequent scenario. In fact, my experience indicates that almost all systems that I encounter outside of the United States and Canada have serious deficiencies – things that we would consider to be elementary design and installation knowledge and skills.

As in the past, I share information such as this because there is a tremendous opportunity for those who are looking for new markets or challenges. Before you simply dismiss international work out-of-hand, remember that the globalization of business is not slowing down. The ease of communication and the proliferation of electronic design, remote project administration, and the need for expertise using NFPA codes and standards makes this work more accessible and desirable than ever. An increasing number of sprinkler contractors are providing consulting, design services, and on-site project management throughout the world. The world needs your knowledge and skills!

That said, I agree that it is not for everyone. There is risk and working internationally requires a commitment of resources and capital. However, with the right partners and customers, there is a tremendous upside for those who do it right. As I wrote six years ago – do

some self-examination. Evaluate your capabilities to do this work. There is little to lose and potentially much to gain by investing some due diligence with international work. You may find that you are closer to having the ability to do this work than you think. ■

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