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Faulty fireproofing eyed in WTC collapse

Inadequate fireproofing may have contributed to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on Sept. 11, engineers studying their destruction said yesterday.

Inspections performed during the 1990s indicate that some of the steel rods supporting the floors of the Twin Towers were not covered with enough fireproofing insulation, fire-safety expert Frederick Mowrer told his colleagues during a meeting on the buildings' collapse.

Those floor joists are thought to have been the first parts of the buildings to fail as intense fires heated and weakened them.

"This is something that is going to have to be factored into the analysis," said Mowrer, a professor of fire-protection engineering at the University of Maryland.

Building codes required that each of the seven-eighths-inch-thick steel rods making up the floor joists be coated with 2 inches of fire protection. But some photographs taken during the inspections show only a spattering of fireproofing.

"Do we have vulnerabilities that are beginning to emerge?" Cornell University structural engineer Thomas O'Rourke wondered.

But Hyman Brown, an engineer who supervised the construction of the towers, said the fireproofing met the highest standards and was not a factor in the collapse.

"It lasted the amount of time it was supposed to last, and 95 percent of the people got out," said Brown, now a professor at the University of Colorado. "To say that it wasn't adequate when it did its job, I don't understand."

Mowrer said it is too early to say definitively whether inadequate fireproofing played a part in the buildings' collapse. But he said his research so far indicates it should be considered. *AP*

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