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The Importance of Proper Attic Ventilation

Attic Ventilation

By: Patrick Breen

As homeowners we focus a great deal of our attention on keeping the elements out while retaining those interior conditions we've worked hard, and paid good money, to generate. There is, however, one area that is vital to keep properly circulated, and is often overlooked - our attics.

You might think that because you have a couple of gable vents and some box venting on the roof that everything is as it should be. Unfortunately, this is not often the case. Your structure might have been built with improper venting to begin with or, through remodeling projects, the system was changed and no longer functions as it should.

The primary need for proper attic ventilation is to allow excess heat and moisture to escape. During the summer months it is important for heat to escape not only to help reduce energy used for cooling, but to help prolong the life of your shingles. If the south side of your roofing is deteriorating faster than the rest of the roof surface there is a good chance you have a poorly vented attic space.

Moisture can enter the attic from both the outside and inside environment. If your attic does not have enough insulation humidity will migrate into this space from below promoting degradation of insulation along with structural wood rot from mold. It is important to note that setting aside humidity from house plants, and from general washing, the typical household generates 3 gallons of water per day from just breathing and perspiration.

The properly ventilated attic will have sufficient insulation along with two types of vents. One vent system is low on the roof line and generally located in the soffits. While the second system is up close to the ridge allowing fresh air to enter down low, with hotter air escaping out of the top.

Typical problems that I find with attic circulation is when an addition to the house has covered, or removed, soffit vents; or when insulation has been added in the attic covering the chutes. These air channels, or chutes, are baffles that allow the air to flow from the soffit vents, past the insulation, and then up and out of the top vents. It is not uncommon to find these chutes crushed or covered from additional insulation that has been installed by the homeowner.

In this region of the country general home construction requires a 1/150 ratio of attic venting. What this means is that for every 150 square feet of attic space you should have one square foot of ventilation. This is divided between both venting systems. If you have 300 sq. ft. of attic space you will need one sq. ft. of venting down low, and one sq. ft. at the ridge.

After visually checking your vents for proper clearance and size ratio I recommend waiting until the sun has gone down to check the temperature of your attic. A properly insulated and vented attic should be close to the same temperature inside as it is outside.