

Builder has become straw m

By LAURIE WILLIAMS

Herald staff writer

Bob Merrill's straw houses would need more than a huff and a puff to be blown down.

The Bend, Ore., man specializes in building sturdy homes and other structures with reclaimed and recycled materials, including old tires, aluminum cans and bales of straw.

Those materials make homes less costly, and also save energy.

Merrill plans a workshop Thursday and Friday in Kennewick to demonstrate building with bales, as well as using passive solar designs, home power generation and other technologies.

On Thursday, a free slide show on "hybrid construction" is planned at 6:30 p.m. at the Impact Training Center, 3180 W. Clearwater Ave., behind the Sizzler restaurant.

Friday, Merrill takes to the field for a hands-on demonstration from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the corner of 27th Avenue and S. Yew Street in Kennewick. Cost is \$45, including materials and lunch. Both sessions are open to the public.

"We hope to be designing some buildings out of this," said Dave Pharmer, owner of Papidesign, an architectural and planning firm in Kennewick.

"We're looking for less expensive materials, so we can make less expensive homes in the Tri-Cities," he said.

Pharmer saw one of Merrill's demonstrations in Portland in August and organized a similar exhibit in the Tri-Cities. "We're always interested in looking for new materials," he said.

Historically, straw is not a new building tool. Pharmer said there are many homes in the United States that have stood for at least 100 years and were built with bundles of the yellowish grain stalks.

More recently, reclaimed materials have been popular for buildings in the Southwest and Northeast, Pharmer said. But it's only recently the materials have gained attention in the Northwest, he said.

Merrill's demonstrations will show how the low-moisture and insect-free bales are specially sealed with a thin layer of concrete and stucco, like a large building block.

The blocks have an insulation value of R-54 instead of a standard wall's R-19 insulation value.

There is a drawback; only a few states have wholly endorsed these building materials. So in Washington and Oregon, use of the materials is limited to nonsupporting walls and for shops and other nonresidential buildings.

And Pharmer said most county building departments require engineering reports to document the materials' effectiveness.

For more information about the lecture and workshop, call Papidesign



Photo courtesy of

Bob Merrill of Bend, Ore., shows how to build a wall out of aluminum cans during an August demonstration in Portland. He will be giving a slide show Thursday and Friday in Kennewick.