

MEMO CITED NEED FOR FLAME RETARDANT

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The state may have violated its own fire code by not spraying flame retardant on the Christmas tree that caused Wednesday's fire at the Governor's Mansion.

Less than three weeks ago, the state fire marshal sent a memo to all building administrators in state government reminding them of the requirement, the Deseret News has learned. The memo, based on the state's Uniform Fire Code, said that any natural Christmas tree in any state-regulated or state-owned building must be:

- Treated with an approved flame retardant.
- Kept in a water-filled stand.
- Fresh and kept indoors ``for the shortest possible time."

Workers wanted to treat the tree in the Governor's Mansion with fire-retardant spray left over from that used on a tree in the Capitol. But the mansion tree was already decorated, according to Neal Stowe, director of the Division of Facilities Construction and Management.

``We know that's not an excuse, but there was a lot of anxiousness to get the tree decorated," he said.

He said trees at the mansion have never been treated but that this year's tree came the closest to getting the treatment. He does not think the mansion is technically a building where retardant is required. ``It fits into some gray areas (of the code). Still, in hindsight, a retardant should have been on there. The Leavitts do a lot of public entertaining."

Lynn Borg, state fire marshal, says the code doesn't apply to the mansion because it is mainly a residence. However, the historic building's first floor is open to scheduled tours. And its third floor is used for public entertainment. In fact, more than 600 people were expected to attend events at the mansion this week.

Only its second floor, where the governor and his family live, is off-limits to the public.

``There are so many categories to the fire code and we have to stick to it . . . we have to classify a building according to what its major use is," Borg said.

He said he ``felt bad" about the tree not being treated but wasn't surprised because, despite warnings from fire officials, most people don't think of applying flame retardant.

Every public building administrator should know about the requirement, Borg said.

``It's easy to lay fault after the fact. I mean hindsight is always 20/20," he said.

Stowe said he and his crews were aware of the Nov. 29 memo from Borg.

The mansion teems with Utah history. Imported woods adorned floors, ceilings and staircases, and half-inch thick windows will be impossible to replace.

Damage estimates for the fire rose to \$1.7 million Friday. But restoration could cost as much as \$5 million.