

# Measured Air Change Rates and Distribution Ventilation Air in a Single Family Home

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## Abstract:

*A single-story, single-family, 1350 ft<sup>2</sup> house located in Las Vegas, NV was outfitted with two separate ventilation systems. The systems were independent of each other, and were operated at different times to evaluate the relative difference in air change rate and distribution of ventilation air induced by their operation. One system was an intermittently operated central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system, wherein, 47 ft<sup>3</sup> / min of outside air was ducted from a high wall location on the building exterior to the return air side of the central heating and cooling system blower. The other system was a continuously operated separate supply ventilation system, not connected to the central air distribution ducts, wherein, a separate fan drew 54 ft<sup>3</sup> / min of outside air and 112 ft<sup>3</sup> / min of re-circulated inside air from the master bedroom and delivered the resulting 166 ft<sup>3</sup> / min of mixed air to the main living area of the house. During the testing, all interior doors were closed, and a computer controlled six-zone gas analyzer measured tracer gas concentration in the main living area and all closed rooms. Results showed that the intermittently operated central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system gave excellent uniformity of ventilation air distribution, while the installed outside air duct was undersized. The continuously operated separate supply ventilation system showed poor ventilation air distribution for closed bedrooms where there was no ventilation system ducting, while the air change rate for the main living area, and to a lesser extent the master bedroom, was adequate according to design.*

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# Measured Air Change Rates and Distribution of Ventilation Air In A Single Family Home

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## ABSTRACT

A single-story, single-family, 1350 ft<sup>2</sup> house located in Las Vegas, NV was outfitted with two separate ventilation systems. The systems were independent of each other, and were operated at different times to evaluate the relative difference in air change rate and distribution of ventilation air induced by their operation. One system was an intermittently operated central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system, wherein, 47 ft<sup>3</sup>/min of outside air was ducted from a high wall location on the building exterior to the return air side of the central heating and cooling system blower. The other system was a continuously operated separate supply ventilation system, not connected to the central air distribution ducts, wherein, a separate fan drew 54 ft<sup>3</sup>/min of outside air and 112 ft<sup>3</sup>/min of re-circulated inside air from the master bedroom and delivered the resulting 166 ft<sup>3</sup>/min of mixed air to the main living area of the house. During the testing, all interior doors were closed, and a computer controlled six-zone gas analyzer measured tracer gas concentration in the main living area and all closed rooms. Results showed that the intermittently operated central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system gave excellent uniformity of ventilation air distribution, while the installed outside air duct was undersized. The continuously operated separate supply ventilation system showed poor ventilation air distribution for closed bedrooms where there was no ventilation system ducting, while the air change rate for the main living area, and to a lesser extent the master bedroom, was adequate according to design.

## INTRODUCTION

Energy efficient homes inherently have low air leakage rates and therefore require mechanical ventilation for acceptable indoor air quality.

Supply ventilation systems draw outside air from a known location and deliver it to the interior living space. This known location should be selected to maximize the ventilation air quality. The air can be treated before distribution to the living space (one or more of: heated, cooled, dehumidified, filtered, cleaned). If supply ventilation air is not pre-treated, it should be mixed with re-circulated indoor air to mitigate discomfort effects of the outside air. Supply ventilation will tend to pressurize an interior space relative to the outdoors, causing inside air to be forced out through leak sites (cracks, holes, etc.) located randomly in the building enclosure. This strategy is advantageous in warm-humid climates to minimize moisture entry into the building structure from outdoors.

Supply ventilation systems can be powered and ducted in many different ways. How the system is powered, i.e. how fresh air is forced into the house, will effect the first cost and operating cost. How the system is ducted will affect the first cost and the capacity of the system to distribute ventilation air uniformly to all occupied spaces in the home.

The focus of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of two different supply ventilation systems in providing adequate air change rates and uniform distribution of fresh air. Both of the ventilation systems tested have been used by production builders

as part of the USDOE Building America Program, Building Science Consortium. The central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system is being used extensively.

## TEST SETUP

Two ventilation systems were installed in the same 1350 ft<sup>2</sup> house, in Las Vegas, NV, to individually evaluate their effectiveness in providing adequate air change rates and uniform distribution of fresh air throughout the house.

One system was central-fan-integrated supply ventilation, wherein, outside air was ducted from a high wall location on the building exterior to the return air side of the central heating and cooling system blower (Rudd 1998). This system utilized the existing central heating and cooling system ducts and blower to provide ventilation air and conditioned air at the same time. A *FanRecycler*<sup>TM</sup> control (*The News*1998, *Builder* 1998, *EDU* 1997) is used to periodically cycle the central blower to distribute ventilation air and provide mixing during stagnant periods when there is no thermostat demand to circulate air for purposes of heating or cooling. A schematic of the central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system installed in the test house is shown in Figure 1. In this house, the attic was not vented, and the roof insulation was applied directly under the roof sheathing - called a "sealed-cathedralized" attic (Rudd, Lstiburek 1998). Hence, the attic mounted air handler and ducts were inside conditioned space, eliminating air distribution system losses. The outside air duct was a four inch diameter expanded aluminum duct connected to a four inch wall cap at the exterior wall and connected to a register box, modified to hold a standard 12"x12" filter, at the return plenum of the central heating and cooling air handler unit. The outside air duct was undersized for this house, allowing in only 47 ft<sup>3</sup>/min through the four inch duct. The target outside air flow for this house was 80 ft<sup>3</sup>/min according to **Eq. 1** and the following given parameters:

- 40 ft<sup>3</sup>/min continuous ventilation required for the occupants of the three bedroom house
- 33% central fan duty cycle
- 0.10 air changes per hour in-between central fan cycles
- house volume of 12,150 ft<sup>3</sup>

$$\dot{Q}_{cfan} = \frac{(\dot{Q}_{cont}) - (\frac{1}{60} V(1 - f))}{f} \text{Eq. 1}$$

where:

$Q_{cfan}$  = intermittent outside air flow rate through the central fan (ft<sup>3</sup>/min)

$Q_{cont}$  = continuous outside air flow rate required (ft<sup>3</sup>/min)

$l$  = estimate of natural air change when central fan is not operating (1/h or ach)

$V$  = volume of conditioned space (ft<sup>3</sup>)

$f$  = fan duty cycle fraction



Air change rate and ventilation air distribution effectiveness was measured using a computer controlled multi-zone gas analyzer. Sulfur hexafluoride (SF<sub>6</sub>) was the tracer gas. The gas analyzer was setup to measure SF<sub>6</sub> concentration at approximately two minute intervals in six locations: southeast bedroom, southwest bedroom, main living area hall, living room, master bedroom, and master bathroom. Decay of the tracer gas gives the air change rate according to Eq.

$$I = \frac{\ln (C_f / C_o)}{t} \text{ Eq. 2}$$

where:

$I$  = air change rate (1/h or ach)

$C_f$  = final concentration

$C_o$  = initial concentration

$t$  = time (h)

During the testing, all interior doors were closed to represent overnight sleeping conditions. It is during this time that effective distribution of ventilation air is most needed.

## RESULTS

Testing commenced on 8 August 1998 at 2 pm and ended on 10 August 1998 at 9 am. To begin testing, the central heating and cooling system fan was turned on and SF<sub>6</sub> tracer gas was released into the return air grille. As the fan continued to operate, the tracer gas was mixed throughout the house until, after about 45 minutes, a uniform concentration of about 4 parts per million (ppm) was reached.

At this point, the first test period for the central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system began. The thermostat fan switch was left in the ON position, and the outside air duct was open. Since it was also hot outside, the thermostat system switch was left in the COOL position causing the compressor to cycle in response to thermostat demand.

Table 1 shows the air change results for tests of the central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system and the separate supply ventilation system. For the first central-fan-integrated ventilation test (Test ID 1), with the central fan operating constantly, a very uniform air change rate of between 0.33 and 0.34 was achieved in all six of the monitored spaces.

To obtain a baseline air change rate for the house (Test ID 2) without heating or cooling or ventilation operation, the thermostat system mode switch was turned to OFF, the thermostat fan switch was turned to AUTO, and the *FanRecycler* was turned OFF. As shown in Table 1, the baseline infiltration was very low, between 0.01 and 0.06, and not very uniform across the six zones. However, within each zone, the air change rate was consistent. The master bedroom and master bath, which were one zone, had the lowest air change rate (0.01), similar to the southwest bedroom (0.02). The main living area zone, which was represented by the hall and living room sampling locations, and had the highest air change rate (0.05 to 0.06), along with the southeast bedroom (0.05).

The second central-fan-integrated ventilation test (Test ID 3) represented normal operating conditions. The thermostat system switch was set to COOL, the thermostat fan switch was set to AUTO, and the *FanRecycler* was turned ON. The *FanRecycler* was

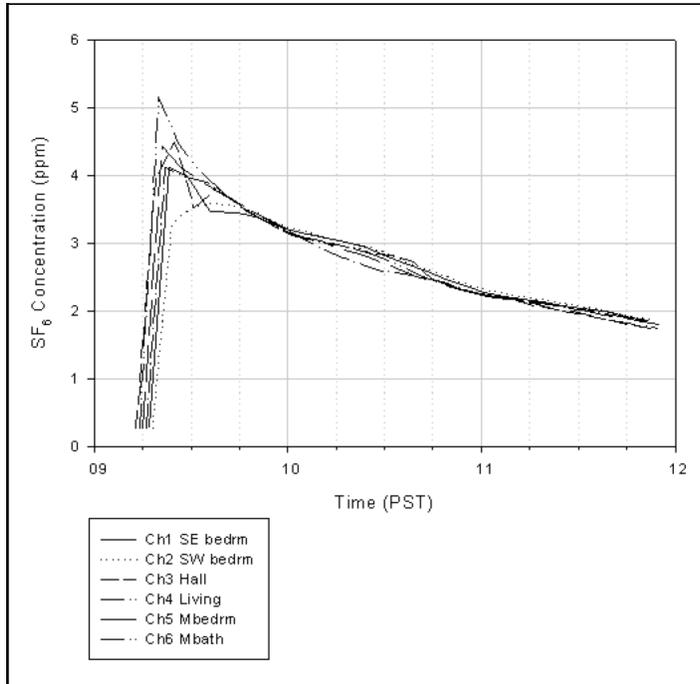
set to operate the fan for 10 minutes if it hadn't operated for 20 minutes, giving a 33% duty cycle. During this 12.46 hour test period (overnight), the air change rate averaged between 0.10 and 0.11 for all of the monitored locations. This demonstrates that very uniform distribution of ventilation air can be achieved by central-fan-integrated ventilation with normal cycling of the central fan. However, as stated in the previous section, the volume of ventilation air flow was too low due to an undersized outside air duct.

Before the beginning of the separate supply ventilation tests, tracer gas was again injected into the house with the central fan operating continuously. However, this time it was injected into the outside air duct wall cap on the exterior of the building, not into the central return air grille. Referring to Figure 3, plotting of the tracer gas growth in all six monitored locations graphically shows how uniformly ventilation air is distributed with the central-fan-integrated ventilation system.

Test ID	Test Period (h)	Test Period Description	Air Change Rate (1/h)						Comments
			Ch1 SE bedrm	Ch2 SW bedrm	Ch3 Hall	Ch4 Living	Ch5 M bedrm	Ch6 MBath	
1	3.16	Central-fan-integrated ventilation System COOL Fan ON	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	Good air change if fan on continuously, for intermittent fan, the flow needs to be increased.
2	1.94	Central-fan-integrated ventilation System OFF Fan AUTO	0.05	0.02	0.05	0.06	0.01	0.01	Baseline house infiltration with no mechanical ventilation—very low.
3	12.46	Central-fan-integrated ventilation System COOL Fan AUTO	0.11	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	Overnight, nice uniform distribution of fresh air to all rooms, but volume of fresh air is too low.
4	3.92	Supply fan ventilation System OFF Fan AUTO	0.19	0.09	0.24	0.24	0.25	0.23	Continuous supply fan operation with 54 cfm outside air gives better overall air change but closed SW bedroom get little distribution. The 2:1 mixing ratio with master bedroom air works well.
5	0.75	Supply fan ventilation System COOL Fan ON	0.09	0.04	0.26	0.24	0.29	0.29	With central fan operation the fresh air gets evenly distributed again as shown by the greater air change in the closed bedrooms.
6	16.15	Supply fan ventilation System OFF Fan AUTO	0.12	0.10	0.19	0.20	0.14	0.14	Overnight, with no central fan operation, the closed bedrooms get less fresh air. FanRecycler would correct this problem.

**Table 1** Multi-zone air change rate measurements for central-fan-integrated supply ventilation and separate supply ventilation

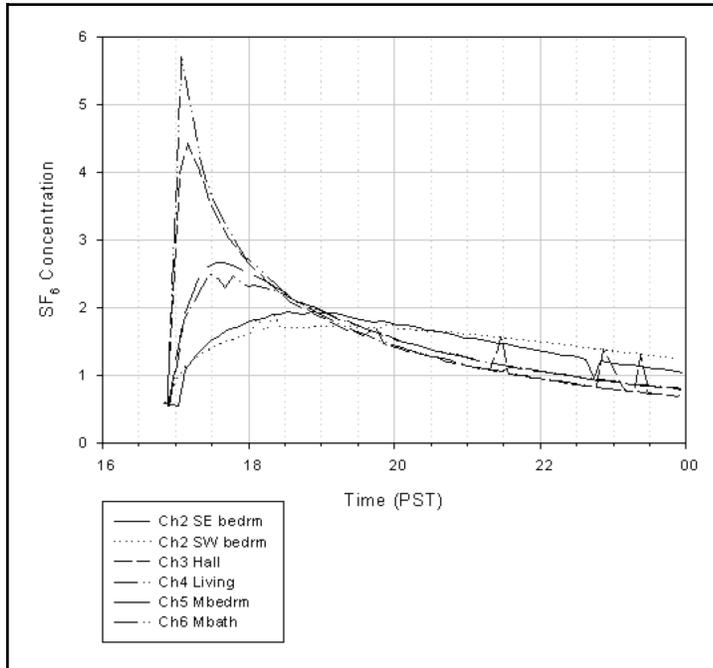
Once the tracer gas concentration was uniform throughout the house, the first test of the separate supply ventilation system was begun (Test ID 4). The outside air duct to the return air side of the central fan was blocked off. The thermostat system switch was turned to OFF, the thermostat fan switch was turned to AUTO, and the *FanRecycler* was turned OFF. This kept the central fan from operating. The separate supply fan was turned on, drawing 54 ft<sup>3</sup>/min from outdoors and 112 ft<sup>3</sup>/min from the master bedroom, and supplying the resulting 166 ft<sup>3</sup>/min of mixed air to the



**Figure 3** Tracer gas injection into outside air inlet of central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system shows how uniformly ventilation air is distributed throughout the house

main living area. Air change rates for the 3.92 hour test varied widely from 0.09 to 0.25 among the six monitored locations. The master bedroom, master bathroom, hall, and living room locations all averaged closely between 0.23 and 0.25, showing that drawing re-circulated air from the master bedroom zone did indeed induce fresh air distribution to that zone. However, the southeast and southwest bedrooms received inadequate fresh air as evidenced by the much lower air change rates, 0.19 and 0.09, respectively.

The next test period for the separate supply ventilation system test (Test ID 5) began with turning the thermostat system switch to COOL and the thermostat fan switch to ON. This allowed



**Figure 4** Tracer gas injection into outside air inlet of the separate supply ventilation system shows how non-uniformly ventilation air is distributed throughout the house

cooling of the house while also re-averaging the tracer concentration throughout the house. This showed the beneficial effect of central fan operation along with the separate supply ventilation fan operation. As shown in Table 1, the concentration of tracer gas did not change much in the main living area and master bedroom zones, but it increased a lot in the other closed bedrooms as fresh air from the main living area was distributed to the bedrooms. This was especially true for the southwest bedroom which had previously had the lowest air change rate.

Next, to begin the last test of the separate supply ventilation system (Test ID 6), the thermostat system was turned to OFF and the thermostat fan switch was turned to AUTO, precluding any central fan operation. Tracer gas was then injected into the outside air inlet to the separate supply ventilation fan. Referring to Figure 4, plotting of the tracer gas growth in all six monitored locations graphically shows how non-uniformly ventilation air is distributed with the separate supply ventilation system. Over the next 16.15 hours (overnight), average air change rates ranged between 0.10 for the southwest bedroom to 0.20 for the living room. During this test, air change rates in the master bedroom zone were not as close to those in the main living area zone as they were for Test ID 4, and air change rates in the other bedrooms were significantly lower. Based on these data, the ventilation air distribution performance of the separate supply ventilation system is poor relative to the central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system. However, as shown by the re-distribution effect of central fan operation (Test ID 5), a *FanRecycler* control installed on the central heating and cooling system blower would correct this problem.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the focus of this study was not cost, it is useful to layout the basic cost issues that inevitably will be considered by production builders (Rudd 1998). Central-fan-integrated supply ventilation systems provide the lowest first cost, since the only additional cost is the outside air duct and the *FanRecycler* control to periodically operate the central fan during mild weather when there is no thermostat demand. However, since the power to





## About the Author

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