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For release Tuesday, June 1, 2004
Homeowner Alert Series

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Five tips for summer safe decks, balconies, and porches

(Salem) When you dust off the grill and prepare to party on your deck, porch, or balcony this summer, will your structure safely take the heat – rather, the weight? Taking steps to ensure deck safety could prevent a tragedy. The State Building Codes Division of the Department of Consumer and Business Services offers five tips:

1. Prevention is better than any cure, so if you're planning to build a deck, porch, or balcony, get a permit from your local jurisdiction; you are required to do so if it will be more than 30 inches above the surrounding grade. A permit ensures that the structure has met safety, strength, and stability standards and that it has been inspected by a professional before guests ever set foot on it. (Costs vary according to jurisdiction and may be based on the value of the proposed structure; they may include zoning, plan review, and permit fees.)
2. If your home has a deck or balcony more than 30 inches above grade, check with your local building department to see if the deck or balcony was properly permitted when it was built. If so, the structure was determined safe at that time; however, Oregon weather takes a toll on wooden outdoor structures. Find out whether or not structural conditions have changed or the wood has deteriorated enough to make it unsafe.
3. Any time a deck, porch, or balcony is so crowded that people have difficulty moving about, it is probably overloaded. Don't be timid about ushering guests into other areas.
4. You (or a qualified inspector) should inspect your deck, porch, or balcony twice a year and repair or replace the following:
 - ? Split or rotting wood
 - ? Loose or missing nails, bolts, or screws
 - ? Missing, damaged, or loose support beams and planks
 - ? Wobbly, loose, or missing handrails or guardrails
5. If you have any doubts about the load your deck, porch, or balcony will safely handle, get an expert opinion from a structural engineer. You can find listings for structural engineers in your phone directory.

BCD reminds Oregonians that proper footings, columns, beams, and attachments; adequate lateral stability; appropriate building materials and workmanship; and environmental factors such as soil type, slope, wind, rain, and drainage patterns can all affect the immediate and long-term safety of decks, porches, and balconies. If you or a home inspector find that repairs are necessary, you may need a permit. Call city hall and ask which building jurisdiction you should contact. For more information, visit BCD's Permits Protect Web site,

www.permitsprotect.info.

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