



Residential Air Leakage (Blower Door) Testing for Florida Code Compliance

Infiltration is the uncontrolled inward air leakage through cracks and crevices in any building element and around windows and doors of a building caused by pressure differences across these elements due to factors such as wind, inside and outside temperature differences (stack effect), and imbalance between supply and exhaust air systems (see Definitions on next page).

To address the energy and indoor air quality impacts of air leakage in homes, the current Florida Building Code includes a building air leakage testing requirement for new Florida homes. The Code stipulates both a maximum air leakage rate and, at the lower end, an air leakage rate “trigger” at which whole-house mechanical ventilation is required.

As discussed in more detail later in this guide, the air leakage test (or “blower door test”) uses a calibrated fan and digital pressure gauge to either pressurize or depressurize a home to a standard test pressure of 50 Pascals with respect to the outside and measure the air leakage flow at that pressure. Standardization of the test procedure allows the air leakage of one home to be compared with that of another, and with the Code maximum of seven air changes per hour at 50 Pascals test pressure, or “7 ACH50.”

If the tested air leakage of a new home is less than three air changes per hour at 50 Pascals test pressure (3 ACH50), current Florida Code requires whole-house mechanical ventilation be provided for it.

Why is uncontrolled air leakage important?

As its name implies, uncontrolled air leakage is outdoor airflow into buildings that is not planned or intended. While some level of outdoor air is important, too much will increase energy use, and in hot-humid climates like Florida’s, introduce a lot of moisture. This air may also be pulled into the building from undesirable locations such as the attic or garage. In more extreme cases, uncontrolled airflow can lead to significant indoor air quality issues. As houses become more airtight, outdoor air is brought in via whole-house mechanical ventilation to decrease indoor pollutant concentrations, but unlike uncontrolled air leakage, mechanical ventilation allows control over how much air is brought in and the location from which it is drawn.



Definitions

APPROVED

Approval by the code official as a result of investigation and tests conducted by him or her, or by reason of accepted principles or tests by nationally recognized organizations.

BLOWER DOOR

A powerful fan that mounts into the frame of an exterior door and pulls air out of a building, lowering the air pressure inside the building with respect to the outside; the higher outside air pressure then causes air to flow in through all unsealed cracks and gaps.

BUILDING THERMAL ENVELOPE

The basement walls, exterior walls, floor, roof and any other building elements that enclose conditioned space or provide a boundary between conditioned space and exempt or unconditioned space.



Unsealed can lights can allow attic air to infiltrate into a house.

ENERGY AUDITOR

A trained and certified professional who conducts energy evaluations of an existing building and uses tools to identify the building's current energy usage and the condition of the building and equipment.

ENERGY RATER

An individual certified by a building energy-efficiency rating system to perform building energy-efficiency ratings for the building type and in the rating class for which the rater is certified.

INFILTRATION

The uncontrolled inward air leakage through cracks and crevices in any building element and around windows and doors of a building caused by pressure differences across these elements due to factors such as wind, inside and outside temperature differences (stack effect), and imbalance between supply and exhaust air systems.

OUTDOOR (OUTSIDE) AIR

Air that is outside the building envelope or is taken from outside the building that has not been previously circulated through the building.

VENTILATION

The natural or mechanical process of supplying conditioned or unconditioned air to, or removing such air from, any space.

WHOLE HOUSE MECHANICAL VENTILATION SYSTEM

An exhaust system, supply system, or combination thereof that is designed to mechanically exchange indoor air with outdoor air when operating continuously or through a programmed intermittent schedule to satisfy the whole house ventilation rates.

All definitions from Chapter 2 of the residential provisions of the Florida Building Code, Energy Conservation except Blower Door adapted from energy.gov Blower Door Tests article and Energy Auditor and Energy Rater from 553.993(5) or (7), *Florida Statutes*.

Disclaimer: This piece is intended to give the reader only general factual information current at the time of publication. This piece is not a substitute for professional advice and should not be used for guidance or decisions related to a specific design or construction project. This piece is not intended to reflect the opinion of any of the entities, agencies or organizations identified in the materials and if any opinions appear are those of the individual author and should not be relied upon in any event.

Florida Building Code Testing Requirements

The 6th Edition (2017) Florida Building Code air leakage testing requirements are specified in Section R402.4.1.2 of the residential Energy Conservation volume. This code section stipulates maximum leakage rates, how the test is to be conducted, who can conduct the testing, reporting requirements, and at what point in construction the test can be performed:

“The building or dwelling unit shall be tested and verified as having an air leakage rate not exceeding seven air changes per hour in Climate Zones 1 and 2, and three air changes per hour in Climate Zones 3 through 8. Testing shall be conducted in accordance with ANSI/RESNET/ICC 380 and reported at a pressure of 0.2 inch w.g. (50 Pascals). Testing shall be conducted by either individuals as defined in Section 553.993(5) or (7), Florida Statutes, or individuals licensed as set forth in Section 489.105(3)(f), (g) or (i) or an approved third party. A written report of the results of the test shall be signed by the party conducting the test and provided to the code official. Testing shall be performed at any time after creation of all penetrations of the building thermal envelope...”

Note that the maximum air leakage rate allowed in Florida (Climate Zones 1 and 2) is no greater than 7 air changes per hour at a pressure of 0.2 inch w.g., or 50 Pascals (also written as “7 ACH50”).

Per the Florida Statutes referenced in Section R402.4.1.2 above, individuals qualified to provide air leakage testing include energy auditors, energy raters, Class A or B air-conditioning contractors and mechanical contractors, plus approved third parties. For the purposes of this code section, an approved third party is an individual approved by a code official to perform air leakage testing.

Two testing exceptions are provided:

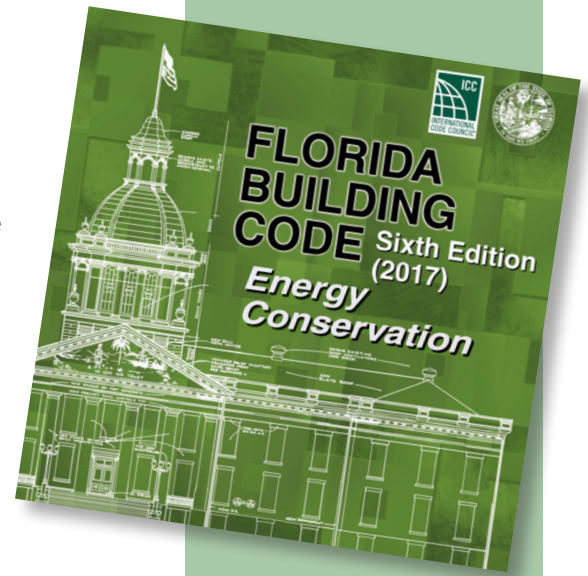
- Section R402.4 states that dwelling units of R-2 Occupancies and

multiple attached single family dwellings are permitted to comply with Section C402.5 of the commercial provisions of the Florida Energy Code. Section C402.5 allows thermal envelope leakage compliance via either a list of prescriptive requirements or through air leakage testing.

- Section R402.4.1.2 exempts the testing requirement for additions, alterations, renovations or repairs to an existing home’s building thermal envelope if the new construction is less than 85 percent of the thermal envelope.

As homes become more airtight, whole-house ventilation systems are installed to mechanically exchange indoor air with outdoor air. The 6th Edition (2017) Florida Building Code, Residential volume Section R303.4 requires whole-house mechanical ventilation for tighter homes:

“Where the air infiltration rate of a dwelling unit is less than 3.00 air changes per hour where tested with a blower door at a pressure of 0.2 inch w.c. (50 Pa) in accordance with Section R402.4.1.2 of the Florida Building Code, Energy Conservation, the dwelling unit shall be provided with whole-house mechanical ventilation in accordance with Section M1507.3.”



Who can perform a blower door test?

Per the Florida Statutes referenced in Section R402.4.1.2, individuals qualified to provide air leakage testing include energy auditors, energy raters, Class A or B air-conditioning contractors and mechanical contractors, plus approved third parties. For the purposes of this code section, an approved third party is an individual approved by a code official to perform air leakage testing.

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Understanding the Test Process

The natural and mechanical air pressure driving forces that buildings experience are typically measured by digital pressure gauges in Pascals. Pascals are very small units of pressure—one Pascal (or Pa) is equal to 0.004 inches of water column or 0.000145 pounds per square inch (PSI); a sheet of notebook paper exerts about one Pascal of pressure.

Building pressure measurements are made and recorded as pressure differentials—the pressure difference between one location, room or zone and another.

Digital gauges are used to make the pressure measurements. Figure 2 shows examples of these gauges. Each gauge has two sets of pressure taps. Each set of taps of a gauge can make a differential pressure measurement (so each gauge can make two separate differential pressure measurements at once). Tubes attached to the taps allow measurements to be made in various spaces or areas while the gauge can remain in a convenient location.



Blower door set up for an air leakage test.
Photo: Retrotec

In the example in Figure 1, the end of the red tube is in the main body of the house while the end of the green tube is outdoors. In this case, the pressure differential between the house main body and the outdoors is being measured—or in other words—the pressure of the main body with reference to (or “WRT”) the outside is being measured.

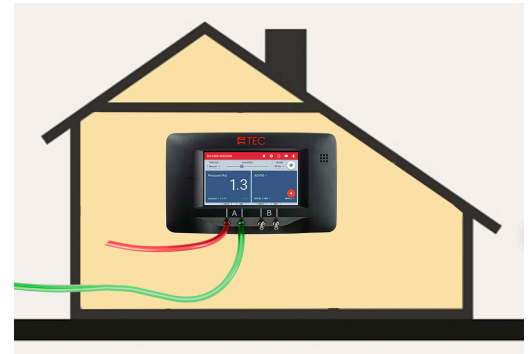


Figure 1. Measuring pressure of house main body with reference to (WRT) outside.



Figure 2. Digital pressure gauges from The Energy Conservatory and, inset, Retrotec.

Blower Door Components

Air leakage tests are performed using a blower door, which includes the following components:

- Digital pressure gauge
- Calibrated variable speed fan
- Adjustable frame and curtain
- Fan speed controller with cable
- Tubing

When a qualified tester is setting-up a blower door, first the blower door frame is adjusted to fit into an exterior doorway. The frame is then removed from the doorway, the curtain is placed over the frame, and the frame and curtain combination is secured into the doorway with locking cams. The fan is then mounted into an opening in the curtain and secured to a frame crossbar with a Velcro strap. The pressure gauge and tubing are connected and a speed controller is plugged in. Component connections are shown in Figure 4 below.

Each calibrated fan has a pressure sensor (Figure 5) to measure the pressure at the fan with reference to the house (or where the air entering the fan is coming from). This “flow pressure” measurement is used to calculate the airflow through the fan. The fan pressure sensors require a minimum pressure to make accurate readings, so fan manufacturers provide the fans with rings (Figure 6) that can be used to increase the pressure at the fan at lower flow rates. Conversely, rings can be removed to allow more airflow through the fan.



Figure 5. Pressure sensor used to measure airflow through the blower door fan.



Figure 6. Rings are installed on the fans to increase measurement accuracy at lower airflow rates (from Retrotec and, inset, The Energy Conservatory).



Figure 4. How blower door components are connected.

Testing and Results Reporting

A blower door test can be performed at any time, but for Florida Code compliance, it is conducted before the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) is issued, after all piping, wiring and other penetrations of the building thermal envelope have been sealed. When conducting a blower door test, a qualified tester first prepares the house by:

WARNING!
Due to the potential for combustion and other health and safety issues, blower door testing should only be conducted by trained, qualified individuals.

- Closing all exterior doors and windows
- Opening all interior doors
- Turning off the heating and cooling system(s)
- Turning off all fans that supply air to the house or exhaust air from it
- “Safe-ing” all atmospherically vented combustion appliances by adjusting thermostats so they do not come on during the test.
- If there is a fireplace, making sure there are no hot ashes (if hot ashes, test cannot be conducted), closing the fireplace doors and/or dampers and either vacuuming cold loose ashes or covering them with newspaper.

Either a single- or multi-point blower door test can be conducted. A single-point test only measures leakage at one house pressure (house with reference to outside) of approximately 50 Pascals, while a multi-point test measures leakage over a range of house pressures (from approximately 15 Pascals to 55 Pascals). A single-point test is quicker, but analysis of multi-point test results will provide additional leakage characteristic information (e.g. whether the leakage is from a larger number of smaller, thinner cracks and gaps, or smaller number of larger openings). Either test will provide adequate air leakage measurements for Code compliance purposes.

The tester then conducts the blower door test in accordance with ANSI/RESNET/ICC Standard 380 and records the house

pressure, fan ring used for the test and fan pressure. This data is then used to calculate an airflow rate in cubic feet per minute (CFM50). Example single-point test data is provided in Table 1.

House Pressure (Pa)	Ring (Open, A, or B)	Fan Pressure (Pa)	Fan Flow (cfm)
50.2	A	96.3	1,940

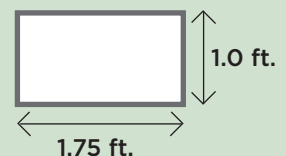
Table 1. Example single-point blower door test data.

The CFM50 value and conditioned volume of the house can then be used to calculate air changes per hour at 50 Pascals (ACH50):

$$\text{ACH50} = \frac{\text{CFM50} \times 60}{\text{Conditioned Volume}}$$

The units for CFM50 are cubic feet per minute, which is multiplied by 60 to convert minutes to hours and divided by the house volume in cubic feet to convert cubic feet to air changes. Given a conditioned house volume of 18,600 cubic feet, the ACH50 for the test results above is $1,940 \times 60 / 18,600 = 6.26$.

The CFM50 leakage value is proportional to the number and size of cracks and gaps in the building's thermal envelope and can provide an estimate of the combined area of the holes in the envelope. This equivalent hole size is approximated, in square inches, by multiplying the CFM50 result by a 0.13 conversion factor. So the estimated equivalent hole size of the example house is $1,940 \times 0.13 = 252.2$ square inches, or 1.75 square feet.



Test results are reported on a form that includes space to record the home's CFM50 measurement, conditioned volume, ACH50 value and Pass/Fail status, and an area for the tester to provide their name, company, qualification and signature. Blank Envelope Leakage Test Report forms (Figure 7) are available through Florida Building Commission approved Energy Code calculation software products. Some Florida building departments require their own version of the form.

You may notice that the test form shown provides a place to indicate whether the house is complying with the Florida Energy Conservation Code via the Prescriptive, Performance or Energy Rating Index (ERI) method, and also includes a field to enter the ACH50 from the Performance or ERI compliance form¹.

For the Performance and ERI compliance methods, using an ACH50 value lower than the code maximum of 7 for the compliance calculation will help a house pass the code. But since code credit is received for ACH50 values less than 7, if a lower value is entered for compliance, the blower door test must show that the house's leakage is at or below that lower value (rather than 7). By providing fields to indicate the ACH50 used for compliance, test forms provide project-specific air leakage verification guidance.

For the example home above with a tested ACH50 of 6.26, if the proposed air leakage was originally entered on the compliance form as 5 ACH50 it would fail because 6.26 ACH50 exceeds 5 ACH50. If instead the proposed air leakage on the compliance form was 7 ACH50, then 6.26 ACH50 would pass.

Envelope Leakage Test Report (Blower Door Test)
Residential Prescriptive, Performance or ERI Method Compliance
2017 Florida Building Code, Energy Conservation, 6th Edition

Jurisdiction: _____ Permit #: _____

Job Information

Builder: _____ Community: _____

Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Unit: _____ Lot: _____

Air Leakage Test Results *Passing results must meet either the Performance, Prescriptive, or ERI Method*

☐ **PRESCRIPTIVE METHOD:** The building or dwelling unit shall be tested and verified as having an air leakage rate of not exceeding 7 air changes per hour at a pressure of 0.2 inch w.g. (50 pascals) in Climate Zones 1 and 2.

☐ **PERFORMANCE or ERI METHOD:** The building or dwelling unit shall be tested and verified as having an air leakage rate of not exceeding the selected ACH(50) value, as shown on FORM R405-2017 (Performance) or R406-2017 (ERI), section labeled as Infiltration, sub-section ACH, ACH(50) specified on Form R405-2017-Energy Calc (Performance) or R406-2017 (ERI): _____

$$\frac{\text{CFM}(50)}{\text{Building Volume}} \times 60 = \text{ACH}(50)$$

☐ **PASS** ☐ **FAIL**

☐ When ACH(50) is less than 3, Mechanical Ventilation installation must be verified by building department.

Method for calculating building volume:

☐ Retrieved from architectural plans

☐ Code software calculated

☐ Field measured and calculated

Testing. Testing shall be conducted in accordance with ANSI/RESNET/ACC 380 and reported at a pressure of 0.2 inch w.g. (50 Pascals). Testing shall be conducted by either individuals as defined in Section 553.993(5) or (7), Florida Statutes, or individuals licensed as set forth in Section 489.105(3)(f), (g), or (i) or an approved third party. A written report of the results of the test shall be signed by the party conducting the test and provided to the code official. Testing shall be performed at any time after creation of all penetrations of the building thermal envelope.

During testing:

1. Exterior windows and doors, fireplace and stove doors shall be closed, but not sealed, beyond the intended weatherstripping or other infiltration control measures.
2. Dampers including exhaust, intake, makeup air, back draft and flue dampers shall be closed, but not sealed beyond intended infiltration control measures.
3. Interior doors, if installed at the time of the test, shall be open.
4. Exterior doors for continuous ventilation systems and heat recovery ventilators shall be closed and sealed.
5. Heating and cooling systems, if installed at the time of the test, shall be turned off.
6. Supply and return registers, if installed at the time of the test, shall be fully open.

Testing Company

Company Name: _____ Phone: _____

I hereby verify that the above Air Leakage results are in accordance with the 2017 6th Edition Florida Building Code Energy Conservation requirements according to the compliance method selected above.

Signature of Tester: _____ Date of Test: _____

Printed Name of Tester: _____

License/Certification #: _____ Issuing Authority: _____

Figure 7. Envelope Leakage Test Report.

¹ Residential Chapter 4 of the Florida Energy Conservation Code provides three compliance options: Prescriptive (Sections R401 – R404), Performance (Section R405) or Energy Rating Index (Section R406), plus mandatory requirements for each.

Mechanical Ventilation

As previously discussed, if a house's ACH50 is less than 3, Florida Code requires whole-house mechanical ventilation to be provided. Florida Code also stipulates minimum and maximum ventilation rates. Minimum ventilation rates based on conditioned floor area and number of bedrooms are provided in Section M1507 of the Florida Residential Code², and maximum rates are provided in Section R403 of the Florida Energy Conservation Code³.

For further reading, a whole-house ventilation overview, including system type options and hot-humid climate considerations is provided in the U.S. Department of Energy Building Technologies Office's Whole-Building Delivered Ventilation article referenced in the Additional Resources section of this guide.

Additional Resources

6th Edition (2017) Florida Building Code

- Energy Conservation Volume:
<https://codes.iccsafe.org/content/FEC2017>
- Residential Volume:
<https://codes.iccsafe.org/public/document/FRC2017>

Test Equipment Manuals and Guides

- Retrotec:
<https://retrotec.com/manuals-guides>
- The Energy Conservatory:
<https://support.energyconservatory.com/hc/en-us/categories/200031985-Manuals-and-Guides>

Test Forms

- The Building Officials Association of Florida provides the Envelope Leakage Test Report form at:
<http://boaf.net/page/EnvLeakageTest>

Testing Standard

- The ANSI/RESNET/ICC 380 Standard for Testing Airtightness of Building Enclosures, Airtightness of Heating and Cooling Air Distribution Systems, and Airflow of Mechanical Ventilation Systems referenced in Section R402.4.1.2 of the Florida Energy Conservation Code is available at:
<https://codes.iccsafe.org/public/chapter/content/7325/>

Whole-House Mechanical Ventilation

- Whole-Building Delivered Ventilation:
<https://basc.pnnl.gov/resource-guides/whole-building-delivered-ventilation#quicktabs-guides=0>

² See Section M1507.3.3 Mechanical ventilation rate

³ See Section R403.6.2 Ventilation air

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