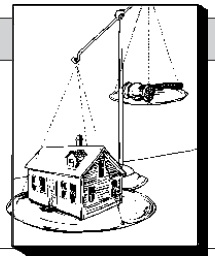
Radon: New Rules & Regs



by Jeffrey G. Gilmore and Karen E. Harrison

Recent discoveries of high levels of radon gas in many homes in the Northeast have led the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to propose rule-making on radon in drinking water, and to issue guidelines on radon detection and elimination.

Radon gas forms when uranium and radium deposits, which are found naturally in soil, decay. According to A. James Barnes, deputy administrator of the EPA, radon contamination may be responsible for nearly 20,000 lung cancer deaths each year.

The EPA estimates that up to 12 percent of the homes in the U.S. have unsafe radon levels. In fact, tests for radon are now frequently conducted prior to the sale or development of real estate. A recent study found that radon gas is commonly found in well water, The gas is released inside buildings as the water is used for showers, toilets, and laundry. Radon contamination results not only from breathing the gas, but from drinking contaminated water.

The EPA will not issue radon-control standards under the Clean Air Act.

EPA representatives have indicated that the EPA will not issue radon-control standards under the Clean Air Act. However, Lee M. Thomas, administrator of the EPA, has announced rule-making on radon in drinking water. The rules, issued under the Safe Drinking Water Act, will establish maximum contaminant levels.

Drinking-water treatment includes aerating the water, filtering it with activated charcoal and, possibly, letting it stand. The EPA estimates the cost of such treatment at $3.60 per 1,000 gallons of water for small drinking-water systems, to 30¢ per 1,000 gallons for large systems.

The Agency has also issued consumer guidelines that describe radon testing and discuss procedures for reducing indoor radon levels. The guidelines suggest that immediate corrective action should be taken when radon-gas concentrations in household air exceed 200 picocuries per liter (pCi/l). Action should be taken within a few years when levels exceed 4 pCi/l.

Testing for Radon

Developers and people selling homes can avoid liability by testing the property for radon contamination before the sale. Similarly, prospective purchasers should make sure that the property is tested. The EPA has established a program to measure the competence of firms doing the testing. Firms whose testing meets the EPA's criteria are placed on a list of EPA-approved firms. This list is available to the public.

The EPA also has a technical-guidance document for contractors that tells how to prevent radon gas from entering homes. Further guidance is available from state agencies.

Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York have enacted statutes that provide millions of dollars for research and assistance to home owners who need to remove existing radon gas and prevent further contamination. Pennsylvania offers low-interest loans to home owners with high levels of radon.

New Jersey has free radon testing for those whose initial test shows unsafe levels of radon. Further, in 1987 the N.J. Dept. of Environmental Protection will issue regulations pertaining to contractors who handle radon testing and remedial work.

New York offers free use of radon sampling equipment in exchange for participation in its energy-conservation program, and low-cost testing for those not participating in the program.

Commercial testing companies charge about $200 for radon tests in an average-size home. Remedial work can include sealing holes, increasing ventilation, or installing equipment to remove the radon gas. The N.Y. State Health Dept. estimates that the average remedial job costs $1,000 to $2,000.

Testing companies can also act as consultants for contractors and developers who build homes in areas where radon-gas concentrations are high. Such buildings can be constructed in a manner that seals out radon gas. Also, special water systems can be installed to reduce contamination from radon-contaminated water.

For a copy of the EPA *Radon Testing Program Report* or to apply to the program, contact:

Radon Technical Service
Research Triangle Institute
P.O. Box 12194
Research Triangle Park, N.C. 27709
800/334-8571 (ext. 7131)

For a copy of the EPA's *Radon Reduction Techniques for Detached Houses: Technical Guidance* or *Consumer Guidelines on Indoor Radon Contamination,* contact:

U.S. EPA
Public Information Center
820 Quincy St., NW
Washington, DC 20011 ■

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