# EIGHT-PENNY NEWS

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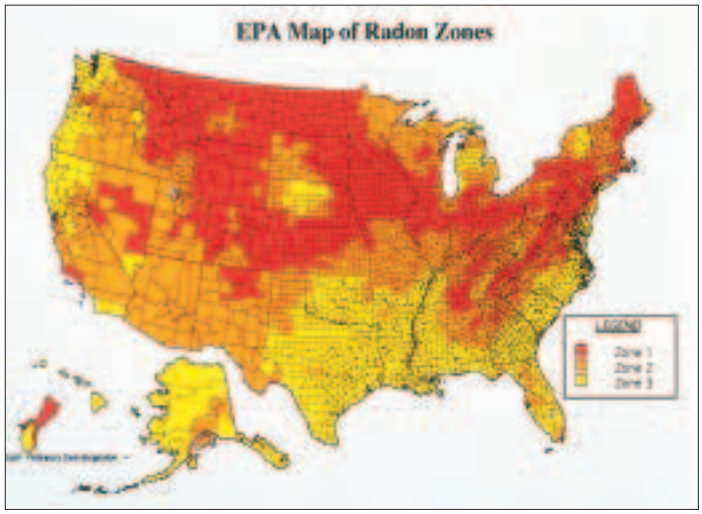
## Senate Puts Brakes on Radon Bandwagon

### Key Lawmakers Doubt EPA Risk Assessment

*by Ted Cushman*

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is redoubling its efforts to convince Americans of the danger of radon in homes. Describing radon as "one of the most serious environmental health threats people face today," a recent EPA mailing advised all homeowners to test for radon, and to "fix your home" (at an average cost of $1,200) if radon levels above 4 picocuries/liter of air are detected. The EPA estimates that one of every 15 homes needs fixing.

But new EPA-sponsored legislation on radon has died in the U.S. Senate, blocked by Senator Bennett Johnston (D-La.), the outgoing chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. At committee hearings in July on a bill to reauthorize the Radon Abatement Act of 1988, Johnston criticized the EPA effort as marked by "snappy sound bites and distorted facts."




*EPA's radon map attempts to rate radon's health risk county by county. Many scientists, however, question the map's accuracy.*

Johnston's committee heard from a string of scientists who cast doubt on the EPA's conclusions. Dr. Richard C. Reba of the Society of Nuclear

*continued*

## Pipeline Blast Spurs Federal Dig-Safe Legislation

In densely populated parts of the U.S., underground space can be as crowded as the streets. The subterranean landscape around cities is a maze of crisscrossing power lines, gas pipelines, water mains, and sewers. Often, no single organization keeps track of where all the various pipes and wires lie.

Last spring's disastrous natural gas pipeline explosion that destroyed an apartment complex in Edison, N.J., has been traced to damage caused by excavation. Miraculously, only one person died in the event. But the spectacular blast drew national attention to what is actually a routine occurrence: Excavators damaged gas pipelines hundreds of times in New Jersey alone last year.

Many states have "dig safe" programs that require contractors to call a hot-line number before starting to dig. But requirements vary from state to state, and some states have no dig-safe program at all. At the time of the blast, New Jersey's dig-safe law was strictly voluntary.

Fallout from the Edison blast will likely change all that. A "one call" bill currently moving through Congress, introduced by New Jersey's Senator Bill Bradley and Representative Frank Pallone, calls for a nationwide dig-safe phone number similar to the 911 system. States would have to adopt the new system within three years, and contractors would be required to call the number before starting any excavation.

The "one call" bill has the Administration's support and will probably become law next year. □

C. BATES

*A new federal law will require contractors to call a dig-safe hotline before the start of any excavation.*

## STATE BY STATE

***Massachusetts.*** New septic regulations published in September allow automatic approval of "alternative technologies," including waterless composting toilets. The rules also allow homeowners whose systems are failing to make less expensive improvements if meeting code requirements would cause financial hardship. A proposed requirement that all cesspools in the state be upgraded to septic systems has been dropped.

***Rhode Island.*** The Workers Compensation Act has been amended to require every general contractor to provide evidence of comp coverage for all subs on the job. If the GC can't show evidence of coverage for any sub and that sub's employees, the GC will be considered the employer and will have to pick up the tab for insurance premiums.

***Vermont.*** Putney Press of Brattleboro will be managing the Vermont Business Materials Exchange for the next 12 months under contract from the Agency of Natural Resources. The waste exchange is a state effort to help businesses find new uses for materials and by-products that otherwise are headed for landfills. Putney Press supplies a catalog of materials available and businesses seeking materials. For a copy, or to be listed, call 800/895-1930.

# A Floor Finisher Worth His Salt

### On the stormy Alaska coast, carpentry isn't just a job — it's an adventure

*by Will Swagel*

A carpenter and flooring refinisher in remote Sitka, Alaska, Kermit Whittemore was accustomed to tough logistical problems. So when Whittemore, who owns and operates a company called The Sandman, got a call this past spring to sand and finish a floor in a new home being built on undeveloped Middle Island, he calculated how much equipment he could load in his skiff and started studying the tide book.

Sitka (pop. 8,000) is itself tucked into the seaward side of huge Baranof Island in southeast Alaska, just southwest of Juneau, and is accessible only by air or water. Much smaller Middle Island sits about five miles farther off the coast, a two-mile-long chunk of Alaskan rain forest afloat in the Pacific Ocean. Several years ago, the state parceled off about 30 pieces of the island — an acre or more each — for remote home sites, and several Sitka residents have started building homes.

The two-story house Whittemore was called to contained about 700 square feet of recently installed Brazilian cherry, also known as jatoba. To get to the work site, Whittemore loaded his 8-inch drum sander, edger, and buffer into his 15-foot Boston Whaler, which he also uses as a dive boat when he harvests abalone from the beds around town.

Getting to Middle Island from Sitka involves crossing a large stretch of open water. Sudden wind, rain, and hail squalls are common in this country during the early spring. Because of the need to protect the equipment, Whittemore was forced to wait out the weather for nearly a month.

"It's not like you're boating on a lake," he says.

But getting the equipment to the beach on Middle Island turned out to be only half the work. Everything then had to be hauled up steep, slippery planks that formed the only walkway up the slope to the house.

Each day when he came to work, Whittemore fired up the wood stove to warm and dry the house. Power for the job was supplied by a 5-kilowatt gasoline generator, put in a small shed and wired to the house to eventually supply electricity for the residents.

Whittemore worked by himself, the only person around for miles. He ate lunch on the decks built among the tops of the trees on the slope. One day in late March, tens of thousands of herring came into the lagoon to spawn, turning the water a milky white. As Whittemore ate his lunch, the frenzied cries of the eagles and seagulls feeding on the herring drowned out the noise of the generator.

"I wish I had 100 islands around here to work on," he says. "We have the islands, but we don't have the houses — yet." □

*Will Swagel is a freelance writer and photographer based in Sitka, Alaska.*

WILL SWAGEL

*Can your truck handle this terrain? Kermit Whittemore needs more than a road map to navigate to work.*

WILL SWAGEL

*Whittemore had to haul his equipment up this catwalk from the shore.*

# *Clean Fill Wanted? Try This*

The R.J. Miles Co., a Colfax, Calif., ready-mix outfit, has a clever technique that saves contractors in the area time and money when they place sand or gravel. The secret? Soap and water. "The gravel or sand flows into place as if programmed," wrote B.J. Anderson of Colfax in *Cost Cuts*, a newsletter produced by the nonprofit Enterprise Foundation. Shovel work is cut to a minimum, says Anderson.

As R.J. Miles dispatcher Jim Price described the process to *JLC*, the sand or gravel is loaded into a ready-mix truck at the plant, along with enough water to make a wet slurry. At the site, the company adds detergent to the concrete, as is typically done for air entrainment. "It's just soap," explained Price. "You could use ordinary dish soap." The truck works the slurry into a lather, and the sudsy mix flows easily down the chute and into place.

The method was first used to backfill narrow utility trenches with sand for Pacific Gas & Electric Company. The old method was to bring the sand on a dump truck, place it with a bucket loader, and hose it down to get compaction. "Now we just back the truck up and point the chute," said Price. "The sand compacts as soon as the water runs out." Area contractors are now using the technique to place sub-slab gravel and to place pea-rock around foundation walls.

The company used to add the foamy admixture at their plant, but after suds overflowed from trucks as they rolled down the road, they started adding the soap at the site. The ready-mix company gets a side benefit from using the soapy slurry mix: It scours out the insides of the trucks. □

B.J. ANDERSON

*Contractors in Colfax, Calif., mix gravel or sand with water and soap to create a sudsy, flowable mix.*

## FROM WHAT WE GATHER

***The Joint Model Plumbing Code*** developed this year by working groups from ICBO and BOCA, with assistance from SBCCI, has been endorsed by the members of ICBO and BOCA in votes at their annual business meetings. SBCCI has no current plans to adopt the new plumbing code; an SBCCI official said the Southern code group was still consulting its members about the issue. Adoption of a joint model plumbing code is a further step on the path to a single nationwide building code, which the three groups have set as a goal. The new plumbing code does not contain major new technical elements. Instead, it combines the common elements of its predecessors into a single document. Copies of the new code should be available in January 1995 from BOCA (708/799-2300) or ICBO (310/699-0541).

***Roofers have filed suit against OSHA*** over new asbestos regulations. The National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) says the OSHA rule published last August is different from what OSHA first proposed. The new rule will require extensive testing and documentation any time materials removed from the roof contain more than 1% asbestos by weight, even if no asbestos is released and no workers are exposed. Workers will have to wear full protective gear until test results prove negative. The roofers organization says this will increase costs on a large percentage of reroofs in the U.S., because mastics and cements used around chimneys and vent pipes on most roofs contain incidental amounts of encapsulated asbestos.

***Tongue-and-groove cedar siding products should be interchangeable*** from now on — at least if they come from any of the Western Red Cedar Lumber Association's 18 member mills. The WRCLA has adopted a standard profile for the products, so that the tongue on any board should fit the groove on any other board, as long as the manufacturer is a WRCLA member. The idea is to make ordering and using cedar products easier for contractors.

***If you're considering filing a lien,*** maybe you should check the laws first — your rights and the legal requirements vary from state to state. An updated publication from the Foundation of the American Subcontractors Association (FASA), *Lien and Bond Claims in the 50 States*, explains the laws that apply in each state and tells how and when to file. The book costs $38. For information, contact FASA at 1004 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314; 703/684-3450.

***Manufactured homes accounted for more than a quarter*** of all new homes sold last year, according to the Manufactured Housing Institute in Arlington, Va. The median income of purchasers was $20,000, and the average age was 50. About 80% of buyers financed their purchase; the typical loan was $20,000.

**Radon,**
*continued*

Medicine told the committee that the Senate bill would require the lowering of radon levels "to a point below which there is no scientific basis for concern."

***Doubting the danger.*** The EPA's estimate of the dangers of radon is based on the rate of cancer suffered by uranium miners who were exposed to high levels of radon in underground mines. The data are adjusted mathematically to reflect the much lower exposure levels in the home. But general air quality in uranium mines also differs from that found in homes. In addition, most of the miners smoked, and those who did not were exposed to cigarette smoke produced by the rest. Because these factors are hard to adjust for in mathematical models, the conclusions are questionable.

Kenneth Mossman, a professor of health physics at the University of Arizona, told the committee, "Individuals would have to reside in homes for thousands of years to reach cumulative exposures found in many mines. … Residential studies are inconclusive and do not reveal an increase in lung cancer due to residential exposure." Noting that lung cancer was quite rare in the years before smoking became popular, Mossman said that reductions in tobacco use would lower lung cancer. And he added that, given the available evidence, it is possible that radon does not contribute to lung cancer at all.

**"INDIVIDUALS WOULD HAVE TO RESIDE IN HOMES FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS TO REACH CUMULATIVE EXPOSURES FOUND IN MANY MINES"**

***Costs in perspective.*** Senator Johnston's move to halt action on the radon bill is part of a larger move in the Senate to halt environmental regulations that are not cost-effective. Johnston recently introduced an amendment to the Clean Water Act that would require the EPA to undertake a cost-benefit analysis before imposing any new regulations. Action on the bill, which passed the Senate in May, is now held up in the House because environmental groups oppose the cost-analysis amendment.

Johnston's aim is to prevent a repeat of the nation's experience with asbestos abatement. The widespread effort to remove asbestos from buildings, which actually increased asbestos exposure to occupants of many buildings, is now viewed by many as a costly boondoggle.

In the case of radon, the EPA estimated that abatement measures would cost the country $44 billion, although Johnston believes the cost could go higher. The EPA estimates that radon-caused cancer deaths nationwide number from 7,000 to 30,000 yearly. But Dr. Jonathan Samet, chairman of a National Research Council committee looking into the subject, told the committee that even if the true figure is within that range, only a fraction of those deaths would be preventable, because radon abatement techniques are only partially effective.

If the $44 billion program did save 7,000 lives annually, that would mean an investment of over $6 million for each life saved per year. By way of comparison, $6 million would be enough to put 40 aspiring doctors through medical school at a cost of $150,000 each.

***Future prospects.*** Witnesses before the Johnston committee generally suggested that the EPA's current radon action level is too low. An action level closer to the 20 picocuries/liter standard adopted in Canada, which most of the witnesses favored, would drastically reduce the number of U.S. homes requiring abatement. This less ambitious goal is the likely outcome when Congress reconvenes in 1995. □

# Big Steel Backs Habitat Effort

When a group of steel executives went to Americus, Ga., last summer, they planned on building one steel-framed house for Habitat for Humanity. But by the time they left the peanut belt, they had promised to donate enough materials for 200 steel-framed houses for Habitat's showcase "green" community in Homestead, Fla.

*Habitat for Humanity will build 200 steel-frame homes in Homestead, Fla., with help from NAHB and AISI.*

The 200-unit "Jordan Commons," designed by University of Miami School of Architecture's Elizabeth Zyberk, will be an environmentally friendly community of affordable single-family homes built by volunteer labor. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the American Iron and Steel Institute (AISI) are teaming up with Habitat to help build the homes.

The project kicks off with a "blitz-build" this April, when builders, tradespeople, and other volunteers from around the country will gather in Homestead to put up thirty homes in one week. AISI is arranging reduced air fares for volunteers, and Habitat will provide affordably priced lodging for the week, according to AISI's Jim Primdahl. All interested volunteers, not just NAHB members, are welcome to participate, he said.

NAHB sees the project as a training ground for builders who want to learn about steel framing. The Florida project should be a good test of steel as a framing material, since the Habitat homes will have to meet Dade County's tough new wind-resistance standards for buildings.

For information on the Habitat project, or on framing with steel, call AISI's hotline at 800/797-8335. □