

Radon testing detects the silent killer

BY STEVE RANSON
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Steve Ranson / LVN photo

Jordan Lubke, left, hands out radon test kits at Thursday's meeting on the dangers of the odorless but poisonous gas.

homes."

According to EPA figures, the states affected with the highest levels of radon include those in the Northern Plains, Northern Rockies and through the central section of the Midwest. States in the South show lower levels. Radon is a naturally occurring, radioactive gas that seeps out of the ground.

Howe said radon enters houses, for example, through plumbing joints, cracks in the foundation and "anywhere air can get into a house." She also said radon can enter country houses from water supplies such as private wells.

"Radon is naturally drawn into buildings," Howe explained. "The geology below the surface provides conduits or the source for radon."

which averages 4.03.

Howe, though, said the highest level found in Nevada came from Washoe County where a residence tested more than 20 pCi/l. She said the radon level tends to be higher in the winter because residences keep their windows closed.

The levels concern Howe.

"Why is radon a health risk?" she asked. "It is a class A carcinogen, the highest ranking for cancer potential. Radon is the leading cause of lung cancer for nonsmokers."

Yet, she said the media and public shrug off the radon's effects compared to other cancer-causing agents. Among the reasons she cited for the malaise are that radon is invisible and odorless, it occurs naturally, it cannot be linked to an individual's death, it develops over a long period of time and the cancer occurs one at a time, not in clusters.

She said people inhale radon's finite decayed products, and over a duration of time and concentration of exposure, people could develop cancer.

The cost to mitigate the problem, she said, is cheaper than paying the medical bills to fight cancer. Howe said corrective action begins at about \$1,000 and increase depending on the extent of the radon gas levels and where it is found.

For information on radon, individuals should contact Howe at 888-723-6610 or email robertss@unce.unr.edu. For a testing kit, residents can go to their nearest agriculture services offices. In Fallon, the office is at 111 Sheckler Road.

Because of the concern for radon gas, which became a concern to the EPA in the 1970s, people were encouraged to test their homes and businesses for the invisible gas.

Since 1989, Howe said about 25 percent of the homes tested in Nevada have high radon levels. She said scientists measure radon in picocuries per liter (pCi/l) of air with 4 pCi/l being the level where home and business owners should attempt to mitigate the problem.

Howe said the EPA considers any level between 2-4 pCi/l as a warning indicator.

Pershing County, Howe said tops the counties in Northern Nevada with an average of 6.71 pCi/l followed by Eureka, Douglas, Humboldt, Lincoln, Elko and Churchill,

It has been known as the silent killer, creeping ever so gradually into people's homes and businesses.

The "it" is radon gas, which kills more than 21,000 people annually, almost double the number of people killed by drunken drivers.

The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension reminds Nevadans every year about the dangers of radon gas seeping into buildings, especially homes.

Susan Howe, program director for the Nevada Radon Education Program travels to many Silver State communities to bring more awareness of this silent killer and to encourage people to test their homes and businesses.

The Environmental Protection Agency designated January as National Radon Action Month and encouraged local health departments to promote awareness for this invisible, odorless gas.

Although Churchill County tests reveal low to moderate levels, Howe said the Lahontan Valley's neighbors in Northern Nevada show higher levels.

"Other counties around here have a higher probability of radon," she told about 60 people Thursday night at the Churchill County Fairgrounds multi-purpose building.

Radon gas, however, is not restricted to any area, she added.

"Radon is found all over the world," she said. "In the U.S., the EPA estimates radon is in one of 15