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Real health danger or false alarm?

January is radon awareness month

By Debra Reid
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DEBRA REID • Lovelock Review-Miner

Pershing County resident Dixie McKay and her husband Jack plan to mitigate their home after two short-term radon tests revealed elevated levels of the radioactive gas.

The Environmental Protection Agency has designated January as Radon Awareness Month in a national effort to raise awareness and take action against the alleged health threat. In Pershing County, more than half of the homes recently tested for radon had elevated levels of the invisible, radioactive gas.

This week, the Pershing County Commission again proclaimed January as Radon Action Month.

The radon issue is not without controversy. According to the website www.forensic-applications.com, the EPA's radon gas warnings are "speculative" at best and are based on an "unsupported assumption that the health effects of radon could be extrapolated in a linear fashion from the lowest radon concentration in the study (2,270,000 pCi/L in an underground mine) to those levels found in homes."

"On one side of the controversy are lobbyists who want to show a risk to help the multi-billion dollar radon testing and mitigation industry arbitrarily using invalid risk models, and on the other side we have scientists saying there is no evidence of risk," says forensic industrial hygienist Caoimhin P. Connell.

At least one local resident would rather err on the side of caution regarding her family's health.

After the first short-term home radon test result indicated a high level of 15 pCi/L, Lovelock resident Dixie McKay tested her home again. The second short term test confirmed an elevated level of 13.5 pCi/L. McKay said she and her husband Jack plan to hire a home radon mitigation contractor.

Other test results reported to the state radon program in October and November revealed 12 out of 22 — or 54.5 percent — of Lovelock homes tested at or above the EPA's "action" level of 4 pCi/L. — See RADON, Page 14 —

RADON

(Cont. from Page One)

(picocuries per liter of air) while three of the homes in the Imlay area tested for radon were below the action level.

From 1989 to 2013, 57 percent of the 102 Lovelock homes tested were at or above 4 pCi/L while five Imlay homes all tested below that level, according to the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

As the UNCE's new administrative clerk in Lovelock, McKay said she's recently handed out 35 free radon test kits to people concerned about the health hazard. So far, valid results for only three of those radon tests, two of them her own, have been reported to the UNCE radon program, she said last week.

Despite the small number of tests, a state radon map blankets the west end of Pershing County in red denoting the highest radon potential of 20 to 100 percent. To the east of the Rye Patch area, the county is entirely green with the lowest radon risk level of zero percent. More home radon testing is needed to produce more detailed and accurate health risk assessments for the county and state, McKay said.

"Please complete the testing," she said. "If you have botched a radon test kit, come in, get another and follow through with it. It's very important for Pershing County to get more accurate readings."

To this end, UNCE and the Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health are hosting two radon awareness sessions this month in Lovelock and in Grass Valley.

There are three certified radon mitigation contractors in Nevada including Chris Buxton of Gardnerville, who said he charges \$1,800 to \$2,200 to mitigate a 1,300 square-foot home with a crawl space in Carson City. In Lovelock, his fee would be "in the \$2,500 to \$2,600 range."

Radon gas is a by-product of the molecular decay of radioactive elements in soil and water. Health officials claim that as the gas is inhaled, radioactive particles are trapped in lung tissue and long-term, high-level particle exposure may damage cell genetics and possibly result in tumors and lung cancer.

According to the EPA, radon is the leading cause of lung cancer for non-smokers and is estimated to cause 21,000 lung cancer deaths in the United States annually. However, the gas may be only one of the many long-term environmental and/or genetic factors involved in each case of the deadly disease.

Nevada Radon Education Program Director Susan Howe considers any amount of radon exposure a health risk and says there is no "safe" level of the radioactive gas. The "action" level of 4 pCi/L should not be considered a safe level, just the maximum level considered acceptable by the EPA, she said.

"There is no safe level as there is some risk at any level," she said. "Zero is the only safe level, which is impossible to get because indoor radon levels can never be lower than the ambient average outdoor radon level! The goal in mitigating a house is to get the levels as low as possible to lower the risk, but there is always some risk."

Even pets may be at risk, although most don't live long enough to suffer the possible consequences of long radon exposure with the 15 — 20 year "latency period" for developing lung cancer, Howe said.

McKay said a number of local residents with elevated home radon levels have lost their pets to cancer.

"Some individuals have reported their dogs died of lung cancer and their homes had high radon levels," she said in an email. "An unfortunate aspect is an autopsy cannot tell if an individual died from lung cancer due to radon, cigarette smoke, asbestos or other environmental factors."

In response to those who consider radon a hoax, Howe said scientific studies by credible organizations like the American Cancer Society and the National Academy of Sciences have confirmed the threat.

"Such a hoax would be an insurmountable endeavor by a large number of respected organizations who guard their credibility routinely. It is very easy for many people to be in denial. I often want to include a photo of an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand in our power point presentations," Howe said.

Radon awareness presentations will be held at the Pershing County Community Center on Monday, Jan. 12 at 6 p.m. and at the Grass Valley Community Center on Monday, Jan. 26 at 7 p.m. Local student Bianca Ayala will be rewarded for her entry in the state radon poster contest.

For more radon test kit information, contact McKay at (775) 273-2923. For home radon mitigation information, contact contractors Chris Buxton at (775) 443-9156 or Norman Denny at (775) 691-7101.