- Special to The R-C

Residents urged to check for radon

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Residents were urged to test their homes for radon and require a test if they're purchasing a home.

“Make radon testing part of the home transaction,” said Eric Matus of the Nevada State Health Department at a workshop in Minden on Tuesday night. “Make it just another element in the purchase of a home.”

Slightly more than 40 percent of the 2,142 homes tested for radon in Douglas County have radon gas higher than the EPA action level.

The colorless, tasteless radioactive gas is blamed for 20,000 deaths from lung cancer a year and is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers.

More than 60 Carson Valley residents gathered in the CVIC Hall in Minden to hear about the gas which is a byproduct of the decay of uranium in rocks.

Douglas County homeowners have conducted 2,142 valid radon tests between 1989 and Sept. 30, 2010, the equivalent of one test for every 11 homes in the county.

According to information released by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, the highest percentage of homes with radon higher than 4 picocuries per liter is in Stateline. Of the 160 homes tested there, 65.6 percent have tested above the safe level. Glenbrook has the highest recorded test in the county with 117.9 picocuries per liter. A curie is the amount of radiation given off by one gram of radium.

But hot spots aren't limited to Lake Tahoe. The highest number of positive tests in the county are in Gardnerville's 89460 ZIP code, which stretches from Sheridan Acres to the Gardnerville Ranchos. Of the 580 homes tested in the area, half are above the EPA action level and three are between 50 and 100 picocuries per liter, more than any other place in the county.

Matus said that no matter where in the county residents have a home, radon gas could be an issue.

“The only homes that are immune from radon are mobile homes that have no skirting around the bottom, houses on stilts and tree houses,” Matus said.

He said radon decays into radioactive particles that are easily inhaled. Outside the body, alpha rays the particles give off are absorbed by the dead layer of skin, but inside the body they can radiate lung tissue, causing damage to the DNA inside cells and promoting mutations.

Matus said that while radon can enter a home through water or in materials like granite counter tops, the amount from that source is so small as to make it negligible.

“The percentage of uranium in construction materials is so low compared with the massive amounts in the soil,” he said.

Because the pressure inside a home is lower than the atmosphere, the house serves as a vacuum pump to pull radon out of the soil.

“Negative pressure draws the radon into the house,” he said.

Two certified radon mitigators based in Carson Valley are Derrick Carpenter and Norm Denny. For more information visit www.unce.unr.edu/programs/sites/radon/mitigation/

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