

Homeowners Battle Radon

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florence - Last year, after reading a newspaper article about radon gas that slowly poisons many local homes, Bob Nicholas decided to test his 10-year-old, custom-built home on the bank of Shoals Creek.



Bob Nicholas sits outside his home where he has taken measures to combat the influx of radon.
Matt McKean/TimesDaily

Radon, a colorless, odorless, naturally occurring gas, causes an estimated 21,000 deaths each year in the U.S. and is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers, according to the EPA and the U.S. Surgeon General.

For a few bucks, Nicholas purchased a testing kit - a tube of absorbent that after 72 hours of exposure is sealed and mailed to a testing facility.

The test in February showed his home had double the EPA-recommended levels of radon, a level Nicholas called "high - scary high."

The radioactive gas is a byproduct of a complex chain reaction degradation of trace uranium to radium to radon - all naturally found in soils and especially high in northern Alabama.

To block off the gas, Nicholas took a do-it-yourself approach over half a day and plugged pipes leading outside with all purpose adhesive caulking, covered the earthen bottom of a crawl space with plastic tarp weighted down by concrete chips and cleaned the mold from cinder block retainer walls.

Get your kit

- Radon test kits can be purchased at:
The Lauderdale County Extension office, 802 Veterans Drive, Florence; 766-4846
The Colbert County Extension office, 201 N. Main St., Tuscumbia; 386-8572
- Cost: \$5
- Details: Go online to aces.edu/radon or call the state radon hot line, (800) 582-1866

In July, radon retesting showed that the levels had decreased to the upper limit of EPA's recommended radioactivity levels throughout the home.

"I did not know I had the problem," Nicholas said. "I feel better when it's under control."

Each year, the EPA designates January as National Radon Action Month to raise awareness for testing and removing radon gas that, unbeknownst to homeowners, accumulates and slowly poisons residents.

Already since 1997, nearly 2,000 kits have been distributed through the Alabama Cooperative Extension radon program. The town of Killen has the highest level of radon in Lauderdale County and Colbert County has some of the highest levels of radon in the state, said Patricia Smith, Alabama Cooperative Extension System agent for the Alabama Radon Education Program.

This year, EPA's campaign also included the environmental tag line to "go green" - insulating homes against radon also promotes healthier living.

"We want Americans to know that a big part of living green is breathing clean, healthy indoor air," said former NFL kicker Fuad Reveiz, builder of radon resistant homes and radon spokesman.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension Service also provides radon test kits for new mothers through Helen Keller Hospital in Sheffield and Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital in Florence.

In the Shoals region, which has some of the highest levels of radon in the state, two Alabama certified mitigators can install radon resistance systems into pre-built homes as well as new construction: Leon Singletary, of ProTech Services, and Ken Lightsey, of Tennessee Valley Home Inspections.

There is also a movement among builders to construct homes with radon resistance in mind.

In 2007, the Shoals Home Builders Association showcased a home in Killen with a radon-reduction system built by Carol and Jerald Smith, of 5 Star Enterprises.

In the past few years, Muscle Shoals and Sheffield changed their building codes so that every new home has to install a radon resistance system, Smith said. Florence and Tusculumbia currently do not have radon requirements in their building codes, Smith said.

"I think we're going to see in the future all contractors are going to have to pretreat (for radon resistance)," said Patti Nicholas, a retired realtor. "I think it will be part of the building code."

Her husband Bob said he plans to test for radon in the spring.

"I plan to keep checking," he said.

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