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Teach It

When we elect a president in this country, his wife is asked to choose a worthy cause to focus her attention on and therefore the media's. First Ladies have chosen things like literacy, anti-drug campaigns and the beautification of America. If I were First Lady I would put my weight behind the issue of radon in schools. This is an issue that's near and dear to my heart, so I love to see articles about radon in schools. It means that someone is focusing on it.

As part of a class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln two students, Kelly Mosier and Suzy Stark, wrote a great article about radon testing in the Nebraska School system. With the kind permission of Bernard Rogers McCoy, Associate Professor, College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I have the pleasure of sharing some of this article with you.

The article, written as part of an "investigative and computer assisted reporting class" appeared in News Net Nebraska and sported the headline, "Many Nebraska schools have a radon disconnect". The first paragraph reads, in part, "America just observed National Radon Awareness Month but...many of the state's schools have never tested for America's second leading cause of lung cancer." Mosier's and Stark's investigation revealed that, among other things, "Nebraska has no law requiring radon testing in schools." In fact, their own school – the University of Nebraska – "has never tested for radon in its buildings or student dormitories" and further "Lincoln public school buildings built since 1990 have never been tested for radon."

As parents we want to believe that when we send our children to school they will be safe. Some schools have to take extreme measures and install metal detectors and police officers; the local news often mentions asbestos, so why aren't parents more concerned with radon?

Kelly Mosier and Suzy Stark quote Sara Morgan, indoor air quality program manager for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services System, who said, "Sometimes school officials just aren't aware that radon can be an issue." The girls also quote Brooke Runden, the Parent Teacher Organization president at Lincoln's Eastridge Elementary School as saying, "The school district has made no mention of radon testing to teachers or parents."

Not all school districts ignore the problem. For instance the article mentions the Omaha Public School District which conducted radon testing in 2005 and continues to monitor air quality.

We here at Radon Today would like to thank Associate Professor Bernard Rogers McCoy for giving us his permission to quote from this article. We would also like to say that Kelly and Suzy did a superb job on this.



Amen

So now we have an actual case of “preaching to the choir”. Wow. On Wednesday January 31st, Phillip H. Jenkins of Bowser-Morner, Inc. held a radon information seminar at his church The Central Christian Church in Kettering, Ohio.

The seminar came about because a number of people at Phillip’s church asked him what exactly it is he does for a living. As he said, “I got to thinking that I would really be remiss if there were people in my church that were living in high radon houses and I sat there saying nothing.” In fact it turns out that a church member’s mother recently died of lung cancer and had never smoked. Her family feels that it was radon induced.

The information about Phillip’s seminar was put in the paper by a realtor (life is full of nice surprises) and so Phillip got a nice crowd that was a mix of church members and non-church members. The questions he was asked were things like, “I’ve had my house mitigated. Do I need to retest?” YES. “How often should I retest?” ABOUT EVERY TWO YEARS. “Do radon levels vary?” YES. “Just how good are the devices used to measure radon?” Well, the state of Ohio requires that professional testers be licensed for real estate transactions and these testers are pretty careful with the equipment they use.

As with the ripple effect of the stone in the pond, a local television station upon learning that Phillip was due to give a radon seminar at his church, interviewed him that morning and, when it finally airs, will reach an even larger audience. In this interview they had Phillip demonstrate how to deploy an Air Chek radon test kit. They also had him go to a house that had a working radon system and he then explained what the system was and how it worked.

Phillip is an old hand at being interviewed on local television (having done it about four times) and thanks to him people in Ohio are receiving good and accurate information about radon. Are you wondering if the church seminar had any impact on those who didn’t really take radon seriously before? Well, as one of the realtors who attended said to Phillip at the end, “Now you’ve got me thinking about it.” Excellent.

Radon Today extends a huge thank you to Phil Jenkins for taking the time to do things like this seminar and then taking the additional time to share it with us. We hope he’s also taking the time to visit with his new grandson who will have arrived by now.

Radon Training for Massachusetts

Radon In Water
May 4, 2007
8am-5:30pm

Held in conjunction with
New England AARST
Chapter Meeting/ Dinner
May 2, 2007, 6:00pm

Residential Radon
Measurement
May 2-3, 2007
8am-5:30pm

- Affordable Radon Training
- Certification Preparation
- Valuable Credit Hours
- Award-Winning Instructor

Truth

I love this story. There is something about children making a difference in this world that always gives me such hope for the future.

Unlike a fairy tale which always starts with “once upon a time” this story starts: There is a boy named Will Montgomery who lives in the Choccolocco area near Anniston, Alabama. He is a student at The Donoho School and last year, for his seventh grade science project, he chose the topic of radon testing and so he tested his house. And found radon. While the story might have ended there it didn’t.

His mother, Lisa Montgomery, called in a mitigator to fix the problem. “The mitigation was completed in five hours”, notes Deborah Mathews in the Radon in Alabama newsletter. Mathews was invited to observe, photograph and document the process. Will then used this information for a slideshow and a PowerPoint presentation.

The mitigator did not make a big mess; according to Mathews, “it was done precisely and neatly.” And the most important part, “post mitigation test results indicate that the system is effective.”

And I think I can safely say that they lived happily ever after in a radon free environment!

I think both mother and son deserve a great deal of credit for seeing this project through to the end. Will

Montgomery probably knows more about radon now than most adults and that's a good thing.

Radon Today would like to thank Susan H. Roberts, Assistant Program Director, Alabama Radon Education Program, Alabama Cooperative Extension System for always sharing with us and for doing such a great job. A huge thank you to Deborah Mathews who covered this story step by step and wrote about it so well.

Oh Canada

Since nobody can say for sure what a "safe" level of radon is (other than none) governments were in a quandary. What number do they give citizens testing for radon? What number do mitigators shoot for after installing a system? This led governments to come up with an "action level" or "guideline" number. Critics argue that this seems like a random "pick a number, any number" attempt to establish safe guidelines.

In 1988 the government of Canada set an action guideline of 800 becquerels per cubic meter (Bq/m³). In this country we measure radon in picocuries per liter (pCi/L); so 800 Bq/M³) is the equivalent of 21.6 pCi/L. In an article posted on January 3, 2007 by Environmental Science & Technology Online News, titled "Radon Guidelines Miss the Mark" it was announced that Canada will be lowering its action guideline to 200Bq/m³. This is the equivalent of 5.4 pCi/L.

The article quoted Bliss Tracy, a nuclear physicist at Health Canada as saying, "About 10% of lung- cancer deaths in Canada are due to radon, which kills more Canadians than homicide, drowning, or fires." Health Canada chose the lower action guideline number because, according to Tracy, "It fell where lung cancer risk becomes significant and where mitigating homes to the standard is affordable."

One critic of this new figure, Sarah Darby, a medical statistician at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, is quoted in the article as saying, "Roughly 90% of radon-caused lung cancer cases occur from exposure to less than 200 Bq/m³." She further states that, "In Britain and most other countries the concept of an action level has been overemphasized."

And from America comes the opinion of the well-respected Dr. R. William Field, an associate professor of occupational and environmental health and epidemiology at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. He is quoted in the article as saying, "If radon were regulated like other pollutants, where an acceptable level might be 1/100,000 the guideline would be less than 40 Bq/m³. Instead the guidelines reflect what is economically and technically feasible to achieve."

On a positive note, the number is going in the right direction and further, the more radon is discussed, in any context, the better.

"About 10% of lung- cancer deaths in Canada are due to radon, which kills more Canadians than homicide, drowning, or fires."

-Bliss Tracy

Drink Up

Okay, not that I think that radon gets a lot of attention period, but radon in water? Forget about it. Well, at least there are people who care. Witness the fact that there will be a conference sponsored by the National Ground Water Association (NGWA). The Conference will be held on March 22nd to the 23rd at the Charleston Riverview Hotel in Charleston, South Carolina.

The conference will focus on various aspects of naturally occurring water contaminants which are: arsenic, radium, radon and uranium.

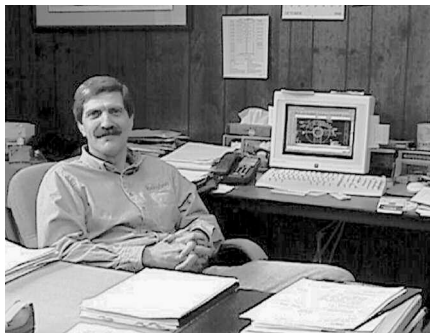
The topics are as varied as the contaminants and include risk assessment and disposal issues, system design options and operating costs. David Hill from Spruce Environmental will address the topic Radon in Water: Sources and Solutions. David Grammer from RA Data, Inc. will speak about Health and Safety for Treatment Service Providers. And because this is not just an issue in the United States, there will be speakers from as far away as Finland and Portugal.



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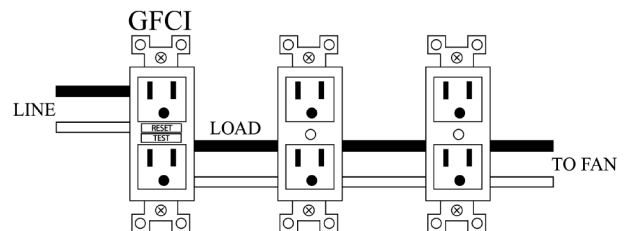
Dave's Corner

Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters

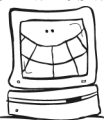
A Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI or GFI) is an electronic device that monitors the current in the black and white wires of an AC circuit. If there is an imbalance in the current between the two wires greater than 5 milliamps (thousands of an amp) the GFI will quickly open up the circuit to remove a potential shock hazard. The assumption is that the imbalance is caused by an alternate path to ground (other than the white wire) and that alternate path may represent a human body. But the GFI is also subject to nuisance trips caused by moisture, dirt and even a gathering of lady bugs seeking the warmth of a radon fan motor which can provide an alternative path to ground. Should you use a GFI in a radon fan installation? The short answer is no. Most radon fans have plastic housings and will not present a shock hazard and also nuisance trips render the system ineffective for radon but there are electrical code issues to be considered.

The National Electrical Code (local codes may vary) requires that GFCI receptacles be installed residentially in bathrooms, garages, outdoors, crawl spaces, unfinished basements, kitchens, laundries and boathouses. There are exceptions for various locations if the receptacle is inaccessible or if a single dedicated receptacle is provided for an appliance but these may not cover plug-in installations outdoors depending on the interpretation of the inspector. You can avoid any vague interpretation by hardwiring the fan to a switch. Is there an issue if you hardwire the fan? Possibly; because a GFI outlet is designed to potentially protect more than 1 receptacle in a circuit, as shown below:

If you tap a circuit in an unfinished basement to run a circuit outside for a hard-wired radon fan you may inadvertently connect into a GFCI protected circuit. The first cold snap will generate condensation inside the fan and piping system and you could possibly get a call-back because of a GFCI nuisance trip. Talk about a nuisance.



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