Oregon joins national campaign to raise radon awareness

by Bend Weekly News Sources

This month the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) joins a national campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of radon and the need for people to test their homes if radon is present at high levels in their area.

Elevated levels of radon can be found in about one of every seven homes in the greater Portland area. While other parts of the state are not as highly affected, it is present in certain places due to local and regional geology, noted Terry Lindsey, radiation protection manager in the ODHS Public Health Division.

"It takes many years of radon exposure for lung cancer to develop, but the higher the exposure, the greater the risk," said Lindsey. "If you smoke and your home has high radon levels, your risk of lung cancer is particularly high."

Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S., following smoking. It is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that radon is responsible for more than 20,000 lung cancer deaths per year.

Lindsey said that scientists have long been concerned about the health risk of radon, but never before has there been such overwhelming proof that exposure to elevated levels of radon causes lung cancer in humans. The supporting data are contained in expanded, recently completed federal research projects published through support from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Radon is a naturally occurring, invisible, odorless, tasteless gas that can reach harmful levels when it is trapped in buildings. It is dispersed in outdoor air, but radon gases can enter a home through cracks in the foundation, crawl space soil, or plumbing or electrical conduit entries in the basement or lowest level of the house.

"If you live in an area that may be affected by elevated levels of radon, the best thing to do buy a test kit and find out if your home is affected," said Lindsay. "It is a simple and inexpensive test."

Lindsey said radon test kits may be purchased at local home improvement stores. Discounted test kits also are available through the EPA and the State of Oregon radon program office in Room 640 of the Portland State Office Building, 800 N.E. Oregon Street, Portland. If radon problems are detected, Lindsey said they can be fixed by qualified contractors for a cost similar to that of many common repairs such as painting or having a new water heater installed.

A table showing areas where high levels of radon have been found, sorted by zip code or by county, is on the DHS Web site.

For more information on radon, radon testing and mitigation, and radon-resistant new construction, call the Oregon radon program at 971-673-0496 or visit the DHS radon Web site. Information also is available from EPA's radon site.

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