

Some Facts About a Clear and Present Danger

By: Walter Dartland, Executive Director, Consumer Fraud Watch

The Tallahassee-based Consumer Fraud Watch, a non-profit advocacy group, reports that 10 percent of Florida homes are being exposed to radon, a deadly gas which is both colorless and odorless. When inhaled, this naturally occurring vapor from decaying uranium can cause cancer by releasing radioactive particles. In fact, radon inhalation is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States.

Radon seeps out of the ground into homes through cracks in a foundation, through hollow-block walls or through tiny openings around pipes or other conduits. In Florida, radon is found in high concentrations in certain types of soil and rock, particularly limestone and coral rock and the most prevalent dangers are found in phosphate-producing areas.

So far, Florida has test results from some 20,000 buildings; four percent were found to have high levels of radon in their indoor atmosphere. According to state statistics, approximately 10 percent of state-licensed health facilities required mitigation in recent years for radon levels. About two percent of public schools, nearly four percent of private schools and two percent of licensed day care centers did not meet state standards.

High readings for radon were found in more than 10 percent of the school buildings in such diverse counties as Alachua, Broward, Columbia, Dade, Dixie, Flagler, Gadsden, Gilchrist, Hardee, Madison, Marion, Pasco and Polk. School boards in these and other Florida counties have been attempting to fund alleviation projects for the thousands of affected buildings. Dade County tests, for instance, found dangerous levels in 645 school buildings. Some school systems, more than two years after the initial tests, still have many school buildings which have not been brought to within safe levels of exposure.

For buildings containing dangerous levels of radon, homeowners or school boards can "mitigate" the exposure by simple repairs. These repairs vary in cost for residential dangers from \$400 to \$500 and for some homes as much as \$2,500. Both the federal government and the state certify qualified contractors, who should be used to plan or complete such work, sealing and ventilating parts of the structure to minimize radon build up in any living area.

Such problems could be repaired much more cost effectively during construction of a building rather than after a home or school is occupied. Some contractors now plan--before construction begins--to avoid radon problems for as little as \$350 in simple preventive ventilation devices or other measures.

Home testing kits can be used to measure the concentration of radon in homes. They are extremely simple to use and remarkably accurate and require 48 hours of passive exposure in a relatively closed environment.

Testing every home for radon is not a realistic proposition. But with the help of employers, businesses and non-profit agencies and volunteers, Floridians can greatly improve the public's awareness of the health risk and dramatically increase the number of homes tested for dangerous levels.

Employers can purchase radon testing kits in bulk for employees and businesses that directly serve the public may want to set up home testing displays in stores to sell kits directly to customers.

With some awareness and a little effort, the effects of this silent killer can be greatly reduced.

About the Author



Walter Dartland has earned a national reputation for diligence and effectiveness in exposing frauds and deceptive practices perpetrated against consumers and businesses. Mr. Dartland is well respected for his expertise on consumer protection, investment fraud and public interest issues. His reputation began in Miami where he served for more than a decade as Dade County Consumer Advocate. His achievements became familiar to many Floridians in 1987 when Attorney General Bob Butterworth named him Deputy Attorney General for Consumer and Citizen Concerns. In that capacity, Mr. Dartland oversaw litigation in environmental protection, land use, consumer protection, antitrust enforcement and execution of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, commonly referred to as RICO. Mr. Dartland is past president of the Florida Association of Accountants for the Public Interest, past chairman of the Florida Bar Consumer Protection Committee and past president of the Consumer Credit Counseling Service of South Florida.

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Editors: Catherine M. Haagenson and Bob Stiff.
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