



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that about 20,000 lung cancer deaths each year in the United States are related to indoor exposure to radon. The only way to know whether indoor radon levels are elevated is to test the indoor air. The purpose of this evaluation was to determine how EPA ensures that radon testing devices and radon laboratories provide accurate and reliable data on indoor radon levels.

Background

Radon is a naturally occurring gas that seeps out of rocks and soil into the air in homes from the movement of gases beneath homes. Radon builds up to higher concentrations indoors when it is unable to disperse. Radon attaches to tiny dust particles in indoor air that are easily inhaled into the lungs and can adhere to the lining of lungs.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2009/20090512-09-P-0151.pdf

EPA Does Not Provide Oversight of Radon Testing Accuracy and Reliability

What We Found

EPA does not perform oversight of radon testing device accuracy or reliability. The 1988 Indoor Radon Abatement Act required that EPA establish proficiency programs for firms offering radon-related services, including testing and mitigation. EPA established and operated proficiency programs until 1998, when it disinvested in these programs. According to Agency representatives, EPA has neither the authority nor resources to ensure radon testing devices and testing laboratories are accurate and reliable. EPA asserts that it shares oversight responsibility with States and industry, including the two national proficiency programs operating under private auspices. However, without oversight, EPA cannot assure that radon testing devices provide accurate data on indoor radon risks or that radon testing laboratories accurately analyze and report radon results.

Recent studies – while not nationwide in scope – have identified problems with the accuracy of radon testing devices. Also, a recent New England study identified problems with the quality of laboratory analyses of radon testing. Nonetheless, a key 2009 EPA publication on the Agency's Website continues to state that radon testing devices provide reliable measurements of indoor radon levels. In its 2009 *A Citizen's Guide to Radon: The Guide to Protecting Yourself and Your Family from Radon*, EPA states:

MYTH: *Radon testing devices are not reliable and are difficult to find.*

FACT: *Reliable testing devices are available from qualified radon testers and companies.*

However, EPA does not have data within the last 10 years to support that radon test kits or testers are reliable.

What We Recommended

We recommended that the Agency disclose that while radon testing is recommended, EPA cannot provide assurance that commercially available radon testing devices or testing laboratories are accurate and reliable. EPA generally agreed with this recommendation and stated that it will review and revise both its Web-based and printed public materials, as appropriate. However, the Agency did not provide information on how it intends to characterize the accuracy and reliability of radon testing in its public documents. More information is needed to assess whether EPA's planned actions meet the intent of this recommendation. We also recommended that EPA inform Congress that the limitations of reliable testing for radon may negatively affect achieving Indoor Radon Abatement Act goals. EPA agreed with this recommendation and plans to include this in its next Performance and Accountability Report to Congress. The Agency's planned action meets the intent of this recommendation.