



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

Indoor radon is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers and the second leading cause of lung cancer in America, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. Surgeon General. We conducted this evaluation to determine how EPA measures indoor radon program results, and whether changes at the federal level could improve program effectiveness. We also identified challenges to implementing changes.

Background

Radon is an odorless, tasteless, and invisible gas produced by decay of naturally occurring uranium in soil and water. Radon is found throughout the United States. Indoor residential exposure occurs when radon gas enters through cracks in floors, walls, and construction joints, or gaps in foundations around pipes, wires, and pumps. According to EPA, more than 20,000 Americans die from radon-related lung cancer every year.

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

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2008/20080603-08-P-0174.pdf

More Action Needed to Protect Public from Indoor Radon Risks

What We Found

Nearly two decades after passage of the 1988 Indoor Radon Abatement Act (IRAA), exposure to indoor radon continues to grow. Efforts to reduce exposure through mitigation or building with radon-resistant new construction have not kept pace. Of 6.7 million new single family detached homes built nationwide between 2001 and 2005, only about 469,000 incorporated radon-resistant features. Of 76.1 million existing single family homes in the United States in 2005, only about 2.1 million had radon-reducing features in place.

The IRAA established the goal that indoor air should be as free of radon as outdoor air. Since 1988, EPA has administered a voluntary program to reduce exposure to indoor radon by promoting awareness, testing, installation of radon mitigation systems in existing homes, and use of radon-resistant new construction techniques. Still, building codes in some areas do not require new homes to be built with radon-resistant new construction. Much of the progress made in reducing exposure has occurred as a result of real estate transactions. In those cases, a buyer, seller, mortgage lender, and/or real estate agent requested that a home be tested. Some States and localities do not require testing or the disclosure of test results during real estate transactions.

The radon program is not achieving greater results for several reasons. EPA's ability to achieve results with a voluntary program is limited. Potential loss of a sale represents a disincentive for real estate agents and sellers to conduct radon tests during real estate transactions. Added expense represents a disincentive for builders to use radon-resistant new construction. Opportunities exist within the federal community to substantially increase the number of homes tested and mitigated for radon. EPA has not decided how to use all the authorities or tools available to it to achieve the Act's goals. Also, EPA has not been reporting program results in relation to homes at risk in its performance reporting.

What We Recommend

We recommended that EPA develop a strategy for achieving the long-term goal of the IRAA that considered using the authorities authorized by Congress or explain its alternative strategy, which it agreed to do. We also recommended that EPA identify limitations to meeting the goal to Congress. EPA responded that it does not believe the IRAA goal is achievable. While EPA agrees that the problem of radon exposure gets worse each year, it did not agree to notify Congress that the goal set by the statute is unachievable. We consider this issue open and unresolved. We also recommended improvements to how EPA measures and reports program results, which it agreed to do.