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Officials minimize granite warnings

 BY RICK RUGGLES
 WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Stone countertop sellers and public health officials minimize warnings by a Houston-based professor who believes some granite countertops contain high levels of radiation and radon.

W.J. Llope, a faculty member at Rice University's T.W. Bonner Nuclear Laboratory, says only a small percentage of granite stones emit dangerous levels of radiation and radon. But Llope said government entities and consumers dismiss his concern at their own risk.

Some granite slabs, he said, "are way, way out of line" when it comes to the amount of radiation and radon they contain. Llope declined to reveal what percentage of stones he has studied that contained dangerous levels, saying he would publish his research in a journal later this year.

Sara Morgan, a health program manager for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, said the issue has "probably been given more play in the media than it deserves."

A colleague of Morgan's in the state agency, Julia Schmitt, said the amount of radiation in most granite is small. "These levels are so low that they are not likely to be harmful to human health," she said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says on its Web site that granite countertops "are not typically known to be major contributors of radiation and radon in the average home."

Granite can contain uranium and other elements that emit radiation. Uranium also produces radon, a radioactive gas. Exposure to radiation and breathing radon gas can cause cancer. The risk increases as exposure goes up.

Jim Martinez, a spokesman for the Marble Institute of America, said people are exposed to radiation from many sources, including the sun, concrete and peanuts. The issue is the level and duration of exposure, he said, and Marble Institute-funded testing has found no stones that have a radiation level that would pose a threat.

"It's unfortunate because people have been playing the public and needlessly scaring folks," Martinez said.

Llope said his research is not being financed by any organization that has a stake in the controversy. He is no shill for competitors of granite, he said, and has no reason to skew his findings. He has a legitimate public health concern, he said, predicting that government regulators gradually will come to agree with him.

The granite used in countertops and floors comes from many countries, he said, but he has found no pattern between levels of radiation and country of origin or color of stone.

Matt Faria, manager of Omaha-based Brazilian Consortium of Stones, a granite wholesaler, said his company cites the Marble Institute research for anyone

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worried about radon and radiation.

His company does no independent testing, Faria said. He said his company's sales haven't been affected by publicity involving granite and radiation.

The state's Sara Morgan and Adi Pour, head of the Douglas County Health Department, both said it would be wise for homeowners to obtain a radon kit to test their homes. Kits can be purchased at hardware and other retail stores.

Pour said she was aware of no case here in which high levels of radon in a house were caused by granite countertops.

Llope also recommended that homeowners buy radon kits to test their homes. There is some correlation between radon and radiation levels, he said. Llope's method of using radon kits can be found on his Web site: <http://wjlllope.rice.edu/saxumsubluceo/>.

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