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## Elevated levels of radon gas at Tobique First Nation Report shows high levels in five buildings

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Residents of Tobique First Nation, where unemployment runs as high as 80 per cent and about 200 people are waiting for adequate housing, have been delivered another blow.

This time, the community is left grappling with fears for their health after a federal government study found that the majority of the First Nation's public buildings exceed acceptable levels of radon gas, a colourless, odourless radioactive gas that can increase the risk of lung cancer.

In one public building in the community near Perth-Andover, the Wolastoqewiyik Healing Lodge, the gas levels were six times over the acceptable limit.

Band councillor Darrah Beaver said the community is deeply concerned about the elevated levels of radon gas and worries about the effect it will have on the people.

"We feel nervous obviously - scared because we don't know enough about it. We're not radon specialists," she said.

In a letter to the First Nation from Health Canada last November, the federal government said that as part of the national strategy for testing public buildings for radon gas, five on the First Nation had levels above the accepted 200 becquerels per cubic metre. The buildings were named as Tobique Child and Family Services, Tobique Headstart and Daycare, Tobique Wellness Centre, Tobique Training Centre/Elementary School and the Wolastoqewiyik Healing Lodge, where the levels were the highest.

Samples collected from these sites that were over the acceptable limit ranged from 211 to 1217 becquerels per cubic metre.

The Health Canada letter stressed the importance of remediation of those properties.

"Health Canada suggests that your community take action as soon as possible to mitigate any potential risks associated with radon," it stated.

Health Canada went on to describe how radon is produced by the natural breakdown of uranium commonly found in the ground. It can enter a building through an opening that's in contact with the soil, including cracks in the foundation and floor slabs, gaps around service pipes, support posts, window casements, floor drains, sumps and cavities inside walls.

Health Canada has recommended that Tobique First Nation remediate the affected buildings over the next 12 to 24 months, depending on the concentration of gas.

The federal department also recommended that the band increase mechanical ventilation, seal cracks and openings in foundations, walls and floors, around pipe drains, as well as to paint basement floors and walls with two coats of paint and sealant. It also suggested that the band ventilate and renovate basement sub-floors, particularly earth floors, and to hire a radon gas remediation specialist.

Since the community was notified of the problem, the band council has been working to develop an action plan and has set up a committee to begin that process.

But Beaver said that for a small, cash-strapped community like Tobique First Nation to come up with the money to remediate properties with the elevated levels and to do further testing on homes is nearly impossible.

"We don't have the funding to provide the testing to our community members so it's only been public buildings tested so far," she said.

Beaver said the band had hoped that Health Canada would come to the table and assist the community to develop strategies and to help with the funding, but she said that hasn't happened yet.

"They do have a fiduciary obligation to work with First Nations communities to ensure health and safety and to provide services," she said. "They have a role. They are on the hook, but Health Canada wants to limit their responsibility to only dealing with programs that they provide funding to under their own department, rather than worrying about the overall well-being of the reserve. I feel it's a cop-out."

Beaver is particularly concerned about the impact the elevated gas levels will have on children and those with respiratory problems such as asthma.