

Centre expands air testing lab

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Safety | City facility can test samples for mould, asbestos and radon

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Take a deep breath and then relax because the breathing air laboratory at the Research and Productivity Centre in Fredericton has been renovated and expanded.

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Stephen MacGillivray Photo

Thelma Green, manager of air quality services at the Research and Productivity Centre in Fredericton, is shown doing a breathing air analysis using a gas chromatograph on a sample from a fire department.

every six months for contaminants and moisture content. The centre is also qualified to test hospital medical air.

Thelma Green, an air quality specialist at the centre, said in an interview the new lab took about six months to build and gives technicians more space and more equipment for analysis.

She said it's about the size of a large living room, but doesn't have special doors or air hatches.

"The lab is set up for breathing air analysis," she said.

"For divers and people in hospital, they completely depend on that air for survival.

"And firefighters too when they are in a fire."

The testing makes sure the air in those tanks meets the Canadian standard for breathing, said Green.

She said the demand for such testing is rising all the time. Many people that use breathing tanks don't realize they must be tested regularly but that is changing, she said.

Asbestos is no longer used in construction in Canada. But that doesn't mean that the lab doesn't do a lot of asbestos testing.

"I would say every older house, say, built from the late '70s and older probably has some type of asbestos in it," said Green.

"It is still quite an issue."

The inhalation of asbestos fibres can irritate the lungs and cause serious illnesses, including lung cancer.

The lab protects its workers when testing for asbestos by locating its microscopes in a special hood that has a fan and filter that draw the air away from the worker, she said.

"We protect everybody in the lab," said Green.

Some asbestos-testing workers wear protective suits and respirators, she said.

Radon testing is something that has been done for a while at the centre, but in recent years the quantity of testing has increased.

Green said that's because Health Canada has toughened its limits for the odourless gas.

"A lot of people are more concerned now so we have been doing a lot more testing," she said.

Some parts of New Brunswick have a lot of radon naturally in the ground and that has resulted in a lot

of testing and a lot of samples that failed, said Green.

The centre offers three options for radon testing: a 48-hour test, a three-month test and a continuous monitoring test.

The three-month test is the preferred option, but the 48-hour test can provide a quick indication of potential problems and is particularly convenient for real estate transactions.

Mould testing also keeps the lab busy.

"We do a huge amount of mould samples," said Green.

She said public awareness about the danger of mould in the home has been growing in recent years because of home renovation shows on TV.

It's especially important in New Brunswick because of the spring flooding, she said.

"We find all different kinds of moulds in New Brunswick," said Green.

She said she and her technicians have been to Chicago and Massachusetts for special training on mould detection.

"We are probably the best trained in the Atlantic provinces to do mould sampling and analysis," said Green.

She said some kinds of mould can be life threatening and she has seen high mould readings in some home samples.

"I have had people that I have gone to their houses (for testing) that have had a fungal ball, that is a mould growing on their lungs," said Green.

"That is pretty serious."

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