

# Republicans fight proposed minimum wage hike

By MICHAEL SPIRTAS  
Staff Writer

U.S. Senate Republicans banded together again Friday to continue the filibuster of a bill to raise the minimum wage, an issue that Democrats said took on added significance in light of Vice President George Bush's campaign statement last week that he would support a minimum wage increase.

The Senate was unable to limit debate to 30 hours, creating a filibuster that many say will kill the legislation.

The Fair Labor Standards Act, sponsored by Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., calls for the minimum wage

to be raised to \$3.75 an hour next year, \$4.15 in 1990 and \$4.55 in 1991. The minimum wage was last raised in 1981 to \$3.35.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, leads Republican opposition to the bill. Hatch recently proposed an amendment to the bill which would allow employers to pay new employees 80 percent of the minimum wage during a 90-day training period.

But Hatch's amendment would seriously weaken the bill by allowing employers to fire workers after their first 90 days in order to keep from

paying them the full minimum wage, said Kathy Wellman, legislative aide for Sen. Terry Sanford, D-N.C. Sanford is a co-sponsor of Kennedy's bill.

Raising the minimum wage "is inflationary and would cost jobs," said Barbara Lukens, staff assistant to Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C. But Helms would support the bill if Hatch's amendment could be added to it, she said.

Paul Smith, Hatch's press secretary, said most politicians had not wanted the bill to come up as a

campaign issue, but Bush's statement last week brought considerable attention to the legislation.

Some Democrats are pointing to the failed vote as evidence that Bush is not truly committed to raising the minimum wage, because if he were, he would attempt to persuade fellow Republicans to support the legislation.

Others say Bush does not have the power to bring Republicans to support the bill, said Kevin Cornacchio, legislative aide for Kennedy.

"The Vice President is looking at a raise in the minimum wage tied to

a training wage," said David Sandor, assistant press secretary for Bush. Sandor declined to comment on the Democratic charges.

But John Zalusky, head of the Wage and Industrial Relations section of the AFL-CIO, said the bill has already been weakened too much. He noted 10 states that have a minimum wage higher than the national minimum and said those states have not seen increases in unemployment, proof that a raise in the minimum wage would not result in a national increase in

unemployment.

The economic models the Republicans are using to show the negative results of an increase in the minimum wage "are like astrology charts" and should not be believed, Zalusky said. The models project results over four or five years and are unreliable because of the ever-changing nature of the U.S. economy, he said.

Of the 16 times that the minimum wage has been raised in the past, only in 1975 did it lead to an increase in unemployment, and that was in the middle of a nationwide recession.

## Radon gas hazardous to health

By PATRICIA BROWN  
Staff Writer

The nation's newest environmental enemy comes from rocks and beneath the ground, seeping through cracks and crawling through pipes into people's homes, causing lung cancer along the way.

The Environmental Protection Agency has called radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas, the nation's most serious health threat. Radon has been shown to cause lung cancer when people inhale it in their homes, said Jamie Burnett, the EPA's attorney adviser in radon.

Due to the long periods of exposure and the long latency period of lung cancer, it is difficult to determine the number of lives that have been affected by the gas, but it is estimated that 20,000 people per year in the United States will die of lung cancer due to radon exposure, said Douglas Crawford-Brown, assistant professor of environmental science and engineering.

Although radon has always existed, its health effects are more recognizable now.

Radon exposure is the second largest cause of lung cancer, after cigarette smoking, said James Watson, associate professor of environmental science and engineering.

Radon is especially prevalent in Pennsylvania and New Jersey but less common in North Carolina, said Mel Fry, deputy chief of the state radiation protection department in Raleigh.

"Ten percent of all homes in North Carolina are likely to have radon gas in levels above the EPA's standards," Fry said. "Most of these homes are located in the far western part of the state, where uranium deposits are highest."

Radon is seen more often in new, compact homes, which are less drafty than old homes, creating less ventilation, Watson said.

In a recent EPA test in which seven states were tested for radon levels, one in three homes was found to have levels of gas that are considered too high.

According to the EPA, if a radon contamination level rises above four picocuries of radiation per liter of air, actions should be taken. A picocurie is one-trillionth of a curie, a standard measure of radiation.

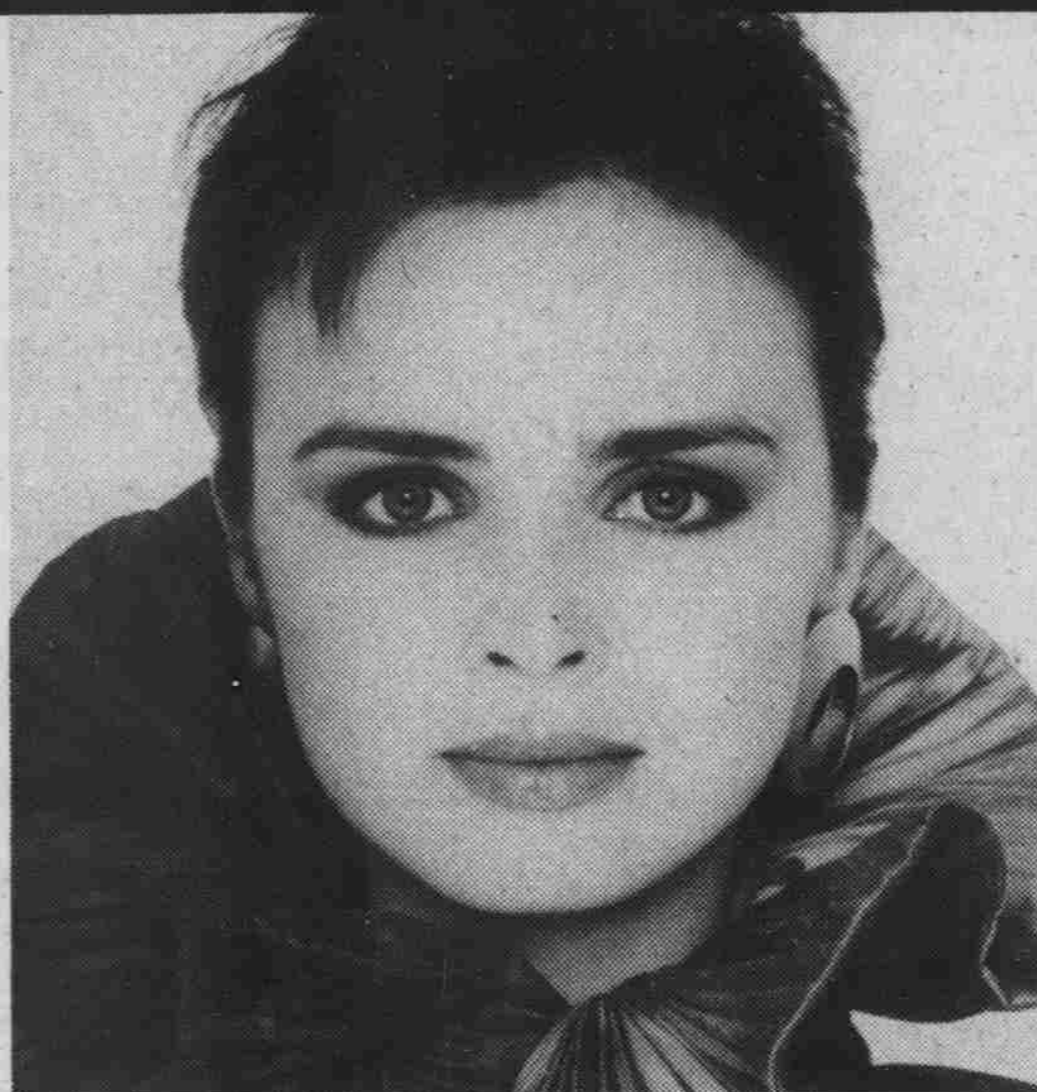
Federal agencies are urging people to test their homes for radon, using either a short-term test that takes two to five days or a long-term one that takes three to 12 months.

"Anyone can set a testing device in their homes and test the amount of gas," Burnett said. "These tests are inexpensive and fairly easy."

If a house has a radon contamination of more than four picocuries, homeowners are told to seal up the cracks and joints in their foundation and increase the ventilation, Fry said.

Although the government has begun to warn people about the effects of radon exposure, students say they have heard little about it.

"I don't worry about something I haven't heard that much about," said Parker Sniffen, a junior from Virginia Beach, Va. "Besides, with so many other health problems, I just don't worry about testing my basement."



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