CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS A NATURAL DISASTER

Last week, my next-door neighbor asked me whether his house foundation would collapse. His worry came from The Courant's recent four-part editorial series, including "Pyrrhotite Kills American Dream: Homes Are In Slow-Motion Collapse Because Of Sneaky Mineral."

The editorials told of hundreds, if not thousands, of homeowners in northeastern Connecticut whose foundations could crumble because the concrete used to pour them contains pyrrhotite, which causes swelling and cracks. Residents in the area are understandably worried about the integrity of their foundations.

Hazarding a guess, I told my neighbor that his foundation was OK. My choice of the word "hazard" emphasizes the risk or danger inherent in my guessing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines hazard as "risk of loss or harm; peril, jeopardy," which is used by countless federal agencies.

If your foundation is collapsing due to the random inclusion of a previously unknown reactive mineral in concrete, the situation meets this dictionary definition of a hazard because you are at risk of loss or harm, your finances are in peril and you are playing jeopardy with the insurance companies, banks, tax assessors, commissioners and various government agencies.

Your situation also appears to be covered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's mission statement: "FEMA's mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from and mitigate all hazards."

Despite the "all hazards" inclusiveness in their mission statement, FEMA refuses to help with the bona fide hazard of Connecticut's failing concrete. Last November, administrator Craig Fulgate denied Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's second plea for help, writing: "While the mineral and chemical reactions may be naturally occurring, the mixing of concrete and the placing of these foundations are man-made events and do not constitute a natural catastrophe as the term is used in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act."

The Stafford Act ridiculously defines an emergency as "any occasion or instance" that the president says is an emergency. This is a bogus non-definition. Equally ridiculous is the act's definition of a "major disaster" as any "natural catastrophe." This is a tautology because the terms are used to define each other.

In his denial, Fulgate avoided the word "hazard" from his own mission statement. Instead he used the words "catastrophe ... disaster ... [and] emergency" from the slippery Stafford Act. Better traction can be found in the Oxford dictionary definitions: "catastrophe" describes a final, unhappy turn of events; "disaster" refers to a sudden or great misfortune, and "emergency" means "issuing from concealment, obscurity or confinement." These definitions unequivocally apply to the case of Connecticut's crumbling concrete.

Floods, hurricanes and land subsidence are natural processes. They become problems only when humans enter the scene. Pouring a foundation on a known floodplain and getting hit with a flood is a man-made hazard analogous to putting a gun to your head and playing Russian roulette. Ditto for pouring a foundation on a beach ridge created by storms. FEMA distributes funds for these so-called emergencies with a knee-jerk response.
Pouring a foundation that will someday be compromised by a mineral you never heard of is technically a more explicit hazard because the element of chance is higher.

Alas, even this natural vs. man-made argument is fallacious. For meteorological, hydrological, geological and biological processes acting at or near the earth's surface, the distinction between natural and man-made contexts has become meaningless.

Someone whose foundation is caving in should let FEMA know that we now live in the Anthropocene epoch, within which human and non-human agencies are hopelessly entangled.

The word "emergency" comes from emergence, which means something rising up from below, in this case the basement. That, in a nutshell, is what we're talking about here.