

The Seattle Times

Friday, March 12, 2010 - Page updated at 05:16 PM

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Use 'green' rebates to save energy and boost economy

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Money talks, and if you're considering a large "green" purchase this year, you might even hear it shouting.

A profusion of new rebates and tax incentives for going green can save you big money on products such as energy-efficient appliances or new home insulation.

Q: Why are more of these programs popping up now?

A: Although green financial incentives have been around for decades, governments and utilities have really upped the ante lately, seeking to boost the moribund economy and protect the environment at the same time.

The federal government has made green incentives a key part of its economic stimulus efforts. The latest example is the new "Cash for Clunkers" rebate program for appliances, where the feds provide the money but each state sets its own rules and runs the program.

Q: How will the appliance rebates work in Washington state?

A: Beginning Monday, you can apply for rebates of \$75 on Energy Star-certified refrigerators and \$100 on the most efficient Energy Star clothes washers. Purchases must be made March 15 or later. The rebates are only for replacing an existing appliance, not for appliances for a new home. For refrigerator rebates, you must also submit a receipt showing you recycled your old fridge.

See the state Department of Commerce Web site www.CashforAppliancesWA.com for full details. Don't wait too long to take advantage of this program, since the rebates will end when the \$5.6 million allocated for Washington state runs out.

Q: Aren't area utilities already providing rebates on new refrigerators, washers and other energy-efficiency purchases?

A: Yes, and you can combine different green rebates to increase your savings. Several area utilities offer existing rebates ranging from \$30 to \$100 for refrigerators and washers. Puget Sound Energy has one of the most extensive rebate programs, providing more than two dozen residential rebates for improvements including insulation, energy-saving windows and tankless water heaters.

Q: Where can I find a list of rebates and other incentives?

A: The federally funded Database of State Incentives for Renewables and Efficiency, or DSIRE (www.dsireusa.org), is a good place to start, although it can be arduous to wade through all the links and information there.

EnergySavvy (www.energysavvy.com), a Seattle-based company that offers contractor referrals, also provides a useful list of available incentives on its Web site when you enter your Zip code.

Q: What are the highlights of the new federal tax credits?

A: For many energy-efficiency upgrades, you can get a tax credit for 30 percent of your costs, up to \$1,500 for 2009 and 2010 combined. Eligible improvements include greener windows, doors, roofs, insulation, water heaters and furnaces.

In a related program, you can receive a 30 percent tax credit with no upper limit if you install an alternative energy system for your home such as solar, wind or geothermal. This credit will be offered until 2016. Visit www.energystar.gov/taxcredits for details.

Q: Are there any other programs I should know about?

A: A federal tax credit for hybrid cars has been available for several years, but the most popular models are no longer included because each manufacturer can sell only a certain number of vehicles eligible for this credit.

However, if you buy a plug-in electric vehicle such as the Nissan Leaf expected to hit the streets this year, you will likely qualify for a \$7,500 tax credit. Car dealers should have information about relevant rebates, or you can search the Internal Revenue Service Web site (www.irs.gov).

Washington state offers a few incentives for major alternative-energy home improvements, listed on the DSIRE and EnergySavvy Web sites. And the federal government is considering new rebates for home weatherization, nicknamed the "cash for caulkers" proposal.

It might be hard to resist such a clever name, but the fact is that many green projects and products already make sense financially because of your eventual savings on energy costs. These incentives just bring the smiles and the savings a little quicker.

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