

No new tax credits for work to improve home energy efficiency

DEAR MR. ENERGY,

Are there any new tax credits or rebates for energy audits or weatherization for 2011? I really want to work on making my house more energy efficient this year but I want to make the most of my money.

—Budget conscious in Bonlee

DEAR BUDGET,

The answer is yes! And no. Yes, there will be new programs – possibly rebates – for energy efficiency work this year, but no, no new tax credits. Federal tax credits for energy efficiency work have been extended from last year's Dec. 31 deadline to Dec. 31, 2011, but they've been reduced considerably. You can get a tax credit of up to \$500 for the purchase of energy-saving measures like insulation, windows, doors, and qualifying heat pumps, furnaces, and biomass stoves, but the credit is only for the materials, and if you've used the energy efficiency credit previously you will not qualify for using it in 2011 as well.

As far as rebates go, definitely check with your local utility as most of the ones that service central North Carolina offer some kind of rebate for qualifying HVAC systems, and if you're lucky enough to have Progress Energy their H.E.I.P. (Home Energy Improvement Program) offers generous rebates for duct testing, air sealing, duct sealing, and insulation – all home improvements that will help your energy bill in a good way. Mr. Energy is hoping that the upcoming Progress-Duke merger won't take this program away from consumers. Duke has chosen to take a different road in its legislated efforts to

ASK Mr. Energy



promote energy efficiency; it would be wonderful if they'd take a page from Progress's book and help out its customers.

But enough editorializing! A final program that's in the works is one that's being handled by the State Energy Office. Details haven't yet been released, but the Energy Office has many millions of dollars that it's dedicated to increasing home energy efficiency and the program is scheduled to hit by the end of the 1st quarter of the year. Mr. Energy has heard different things from his top-secret sources, including rebates for energy audits and weatherization and low-interest loans for people wanting to make upgrades, but he will let you know the details as he finds out. In the meantime if you'll be his parent company's "friend" on Facebook or subscribe to their blog, he'll keep you fully in the loop. Just do a search for Home Performance NC and network with us socially.

And for a final note on the Web 2.0 stuff – all rebates, tax credits, and other incentives for boosting your home's energy efficiency can be found on the DSIRE database – the Database of State

Incentive for Renewables and Efficiency: dsireuse.org.

DEAR MR. ENERGY,

I have an energy audit scheduled for next month, but in the meantime are there any quick and cheap things I can do around my house to be more energy efficient?

—Want to Save in Wendell

DEAR WANT TO SAVE,

You are speaking Mr. Energy's language with this question. First, you've scheduled your audit, which will show you exactly where you can make big improvements to your home to save the most energy and money, but your question also shows that you want to make changes in your habits, which can go a long way towards making your home more energy efficient.

Here are five things you can do that are simple, cheap, and effective in reducing your home's energy consumption:

1. If you don't have a heat pump*, you can be your own programmable thermostat. Mr. Energy thinks programmable thermostats are great, but they also are fairly expensive to install considering that all they do is change the temperature in your home a couple of degrees based on your living patterns. Just do it yourself! When you leave the house or go to sleep, turn up or down the thermostat (depending on whether or not you're cooling or heating your home). When you're at home again, or awake, change it back to a comfortable temperature. Ta da! A D.I.Y. programmable thermostat.

2. Turn down the temperature on your hot water heater to 120 degrees. If

it was previously set to 140, turning it down to 120 will save 20% of the energy it used before you made the switch. Plus, you won't be able to tell the difference in the shower.

3. Plug your energy vampires, like the TV, computer, stereo, video game systems, etc. into a power strip that you can turn on and off. These devices pull energy from the outlets even when they are turned off; a power strip on the "off" position will block this energy leakage.

4. Switch out any conventional lightbulbs for CFLs. Mr. Energy has done the math and these really do give the payback that they profess.

5. Seal your electrical outlet and switch plates. This is a tedious task, but it only costs the price of the little foam sealing doodads and some caulk. Every outlet and switch plate in your home is a source of a tiny amount of air leakage; added together they are significant.

* The reason Mr. Energy doesn't recommend a programmable thermostat (d.i.y. or otherwise) if you heat or cool your home using a heat pump: Upping the temperature causes the heat strips to turn on, and this uses more energy than if the heat pump is working normally. Some newer heat pumps have an outdoor temperature sensor, which will keep the heat strips from activating when they're not needed. If you don't know whether or not your heat pump has an outdoor temperature sensor, ask your HVAC contractor.

"Mr. Energy" is the combined effort of Adrienne and Mark Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy auditing, energy rating, and home weatherization contracting company. They can be reached on the web: www.homeperformancenc.com and by phone: 919.360.1570

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