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By Jim Cavan: Solar Hot Water Rebates

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By now, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone left unscathed by the country's long-lingering economic recession.

On the surface, N.H.'s solar energy industry would seem the latest victim: Recently, the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) announced that funds for the federal portion of the state's Solar Water Heating Rebate Program had expired.

In reality, N.H. has simply been a victim of its own success.

"Because it was from a federally funded grant with a fixed value, it was supposed to run out of funds," said Fred Greenhalgh, N.H. sales Representative for ReVision Energy, a regional company specializing in solar technology. "And because the grant monies were used up, the state, being so impressed with how popular with the program is, has really stepped up."

While the federal grant's expiration will mean less cash back per system, the program's remaining state funds have been recalibrated to actually increase the average rebate from \$900 to \$1500, in the process covering at least a portion of the losses incurred by the loss of federal monies.

Additionally, buyers can still take advantage of a 30% federal tax credit, applied to the customer's tax return at the end of the fiscal year.

Rebate levels are expected to fall by about \$150 per system once the program budget is depleted to below \$100,000, or total participation reaches 400 applicants, whichever comes first.

To date, 270 applications for rebates have been filed with the state PUC.

With the number of overall rebates having thus been reduced, state officials and solar energy purveyors hope consumers will take advantage of the program while funds remain available.

For his part, Greenhalgh is determined to find a bright silver lining to the otherwise gray news. Calling the PUC's doubling down on state rebates a "pretty good consolation prize," Greenhalgh - like others in his industry - is quick to recognize the state's decisive action as further evidence of the state's commitment to alternative energy. "To be fair, it could be a lot worse," said Greenhalgh. "The state is making a nice gesture to keep money in the program and keep people interested."

Jack Bingham, owner of the Dover-based Seacoast Energy Alternatives (SEA) Solar Store, echoed Greenhalgh's sentiments. "You have to give kudos to the PUC for restructuring the program the way they did," said Bingham. "There might not be as many incentives, but keeping the value up was a good decision. It's a reasonable outcome for what could have been a bad situation."

According to documents released by the PUC, the state-funded rebate levels will be increased from \$600, \$750, and \$900 to \$1,500, \$1,700, and \$1,900, respectively, depending on the nature and scope of the system being installed.

Luckily for prospective customers, N.H.'s thriving alternative energy sectors includes dozens of businesses offering a wide range of solar hot water systems for both residential and commercial use.

SEA Solar Store, for instance, recently completed installation of two large-scale solar hot water systems - one at downtown Portsmouth staple Jumpin' Jay's Fish Caf ©, and the other at Crossroads House, a transitional housing campus located further down Rte. 1.

ReVision Energy, located in Exeter and Portland Me., continues to be a regional leader in all things solar, having installed hundreds of renewable energy projects throughout New England since launching in 2003. SEA Solar Store has also remained a formidable player in southern N.H.'s solar market. Both companies would be lying if they said the state's solar hot water program hadn't been a boon to their respective businesses. As such, Bingham and Greenhalgh - both of whom are members of the Portsmouth-based Green Alliance - stress that these programs will be crucial in helping Northern New England begin to wean itself off of its multi-billion dollar a year fossil fuel habit.

"We're glad to see the state still recognizes the importance of solar hot water and that it's determined to helping maintain growth in the industry," said Greenhalgh. "With rising oil prices we've only seen more demand, so a little support's going to mean a big difference in continuing to make solar energy a reality for people."

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