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Car incentive for workers clears the air

By Clare Kittredge, Globe Correspondent

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. -- At a time of heightened awareness about greenhouse gases, the Timberland Co., is giving its workers an incentive to buy fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles.

Timberland is offering its 6,000 employees -- including 700 to 800 at corporate headquarters in Stratham, N.H. -- \$3,000 if they buy one of the new cars.

Clean Air-Cool Planet, a regional climate action group based in Portsmouth, helped Timberland launch the new program last month.

Adam Markham, the organization's executive director, says every gallon of gas a car burns spews out more than 22 pounds of carbon dioxide -- a gas that contributes to global warming by trapping heat within the earth's atmosphere.

"It's like if you chucked 22 pounds of coal out the window, and it comes out in the form of gas -- carbon dioxide," Markham said. "And if you've got a bigger car, a fuel-inefficient gas guzzler, or an SUV, you produce even more. But these new hybrids are beginning to reverse the trend."

The new hybrids, made by Ford, Honda, and Toyota, combine electric motors with gas-powered engines to save gas, Markham said. They get up to 60 miles per gallon, compared with about 23 miles per gallon for the average American station wagon, Markham said.

"When you sit in traffic, the electric motor turns off. And while it runs on the gas motor, the electric battery is recharging. They cost a little bit more, and that's where Timberland's program comes in," Markham said. "You can buy a hybrid for the price of a non-hybrid through the program. So they're basically saying there's no excuse not to buy a hybrid."

Timberland is a multinational company that makes outdoor footwear and apparel. Part of its philosophy is to use business as a tool for social change, according to Timberland environmental affairs director Terry Kellogg.

"We see energy, chemical, and resource use as the three big issue areas," Kellogg said. "We think a wide range of consumers will care about a company that extends its concerns beyond the bottom line to doing the right thing."

Within a week of announcing the hybrid car incentive in early December, one employee in California bought a hybrid, and a dozen more on the Seacoast expressed interest in the new program, Kellogg said.

The \$3,000 incentive, which covers the difference between the cost of a regular car and a hybrid, is paid as salary in the form of taxable income, Kellogg said.

Jason Brown, a sales representative and Internet manager of Toyota of Portsmouth, said the cost of a 2005 Toyota Prius starts at \$21,500, compared with about \$19,000 for a Toyota Camry. But the Prius gets 55 miles per gallon, while the Camry gets 24 to 26 miles per gallon, Brown said.

Demand for hybrids is high, Brown said. His dealership has one 2005 Prius on the lot, one used model left, and five or six new ones coming in.

"But there's a six- to eight-month waiting period if you want one built to your specifics," he said.

Markham says hybrids are "really taking off because people are finding they drive just like an ordinary car, and it saves them a lot of money on gas."

Victoria Dimou of East Kingston, N.H., a manager in Timberland's marketing department, wants to buy a hybrid Ford Escape as soon as possible.

"I have a fairly short commute, and it would be wonderful not to be harming the environment," Dimou said. "Because every day, as you're commuting, that's on your mind. It's a really wonderful program."

An extra perk, she said, will be the use of special parking spots Timberland reserves for alternative fuel vehicles.

Kellogg said environmental initiatives have reduced Timberland's carbon emissions by almost 10 percent in the last three years.

For example, the company retrofitted its lighting at the Stratham headquarters to be energy-efficient. Also in Stratham, the company has installed an array of solar panels that generate about 3,000 kilowatt hours of electricity a year, enough to power the front lobby, Kellogg said.

In the Netherlands, where the company has a distribution center, it is buying "green" electricity from an alternative supplier committed to generating electricity from "clean" renewable sources, including wind and hydroelectric plants, said Kellogg.

The company is also phasing in organic cotton and phasing out certain types of polluting plastics, Markham said.

Timberland has been a pioneer in the development of wind power, Markham said, through the purchase of renewable energy "credits" -- a complicated system that helps finance the development of wind turbines.

"And they're just beginning to scratch the surface of what they can do," Markham said.