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Hybrids for the holidays

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PORTSMOUTH, NH – From California to the Right Coast, companies with their ear to the ground are offering a new type of perk for employees this holiday season: car bonuses.

For the right kind of car, anyway.

The latest, and largest company to begin offering employees incentives to purchase fuel efficient hybrid vehicles is Stratham-based Timberland, a global leader in the design, engineering and marketing of premium-quality footwear, apparel and accessories, which is offering a \$3000 grant for any of their 6,000 employees to help them get a hold of one of the new hybrid vehicles.

Currently offered by Honda, Toyota, and Ford, the vehicles combine electric motors and gasoline engines to generate fuel economy ratings in some cases exceeding 50 miles per gallon. Timberland will allow its employees to choose from any of the hybrids out there, including the new Ford Escape SUV.

"We want to make this as attractive as possible to our employees," said Timberland's Terry Kellogg, who oversees the multinational company's environmental programs, "because we want to make a significant difference in the amount of carbon dioxide produced when our employees drive."

In the United States, transportation is the second leading source – after electric power generation – of human-produced greenhouse gases that cause global warming, notes Adam Markham, executive director of Clean Air - Cool Planet (CA-CP), which has worked with Timberland in their effort to reduce their emissions.

"Individuals can make a real contribution to reducing the threat of global warming by driving more fuel efficient cars," Markham says, "because you put more than 22 pounds of carbon into the atmosphere for every gallon of gas you burn. For the average American driver, that comes to more than seven tons of CO₂ a year."

Markham said it's in keeping with the practices of Timberland that they would make a commitment like this one, pointing out that the company has a long-term goal of becoming carbon neutral in their operations around the world.

"So, in essence, this is another step in that direction."

Unfortunately, Kellogg explains, Timberland employees are unlikely to find hybrid keys in their stockings this holiday season. "The popularity of these cars has really taken off, especially with the current volatility in gasoline and diesel prices. Most dealers we've talked to say there is a minimum wait of two to three months before someone can take delivery."

So, if you want one, shop now.

Company Cars

Another phenomenon noted among businesses in the Northeast, according to Bob Sheppard, manager of Corporate Programs for Clean Air - Cool Planet, is the purchase of hybrid vehicles for company use. A number of companies working with the non-profit on ways to reduce greenhouse gases have purchased or ordered new hybrids, including Oakhurst Dairy and York Hospital in Maine and Harbec Plastics in New York.

"In each case," Sheppard says, "they were looking at the combination of fuel economy savings and the environmental benefits in air quality and greenhouse gas reductions." Sheppard also noted that, for organizations with a health message, like the hospital and the dairy, showing up in public in a "clean car" is a message in itself.

"That's one of the reason so many of our campus partners and state environmental services departments drive these cars: it's a statement of who you are and what you believe," Sheppard explains.

But probably no company takes that more seriously than PlanetTran, the Boston "green cab" company that operate all hybrids, all the time. Founded two years ago by owner, Seth Riney, the company has a fleet of Toyota Priuses that pick up a drop off at locations throughout the greater Boston area.

"I just couldn't understand why taxis had to be big, fuel guzzling cars," Riney said, noting that he also offers people the chance to "find out that hybrids are roomy and comfortable as well as being better for the planet and public health."

To find out more, visit www.planettran.com.