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November 21, 2005

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GOVERNOR RECOMMENDS ENERGY ASSISTANCE FOR WYOMING CONSUMERS

CHEYENNE, Wyo. - Wyoming consumers could start seeing a range of state assistance in coming months to help them bear the burden of record-high energy prices.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal is including nearly \$20 million in his 2007-08 budget recommendations to help consumers both pay their bills and weatherize their homes. Meanwhile, the governor is also supporting a utility sales tax holiday for the first year of the coming biennium and a Wyoming Community Development Authority program to make low- or no-interest loans available for homeowners' weatherization projects.

Estimates place the cost of a one-year utility tax holiday at approximately \$36 million when applied to both residential and business consumers. That includes "hold harmless" funding for local governments who otherwise would stand to lose tax revenue under the proposal. However, the governor is awaiting the work of the legislative Task Force on Utility and Tax relief before taking formal action.

Additionally, the WCDA is set to launch its \$5 million Wyoming Energy Savers program Dec. 1. Depending on their incomes, homeowners might qualify for second mortgages, for example, to pay for home improvements that would increase the energy efficiency of their homes. Wyoming Energy Savers includes the work of several groups such as AARP, the Wyoming Bankers Association, Wyoming utility companies and the Wyoming Energy Council, Freudenthal said.

"The same record-high prices that are bringing revenue into the state are causing tremendous burdens for families and small businesses," Freudenthal said. "Wyoming already has programs in place to help some of these folks, and we have the wherewithal now to fully fund them."

Freudenthal's budget recommendations include \$18 million - of which \$5.5 million would be effective immediately - for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, administered through the Wyoming Department of Family Services and funded by a combination of state and federal resources. Projections have DFS serving about 14,000 households through the heating season - an increase of about 4,500 over last year.

DFS and state Budget Division officials base their estimate on rising energy costs and the inability of people to meet the ensuing monthly obligations. Households qualifying for LIEAP assistance are those whose monthly income does not exceed 185 percent of the federal poverty level, with the benefit varying according to income and family size.

The governor is also recommending almost \$1.5 million to help with weatherization needs for renters and mobile home residents, who might not qualify for other programs requiring home ownership. The amount is based on DFS estimates of what contractors can reasonably handle in coming months.

"Seemingly simple measures like replacing old insulation or sealing drafty windows can have a serious impact on energy bills, and it's one that will last well into the future," Freudenthal said.

Should increased federal funding become available for either program, any unused state dollars will revert back to the general fund under the governor's proposal.