

Air Quality concerns highlight Proactive Opportunities

By Megan Birzell

The Missoula County Health Department installed a real-time air quality monitor at Seeley Lake Elementary last November. The preliminary data the new monitor has reported show cause for concern – there are numerous spikes in particulate matter above the threshold set by the EPA. Smoke coming from wood stoves is considered by these agencies to be one of the largest contributors of particulates in the air.

There is significant debate occurring in Seeley Lake right now about this new air quality monitor. Is it in the best location to be representative of the air quality in the entire town? Could some of the particulates be coming from Missoula on wind currents?

No matter what side you find yourself on in this debate, the fact remains that this air quality monitor is showing unacceptable levels of particulates in our air, and it is the monitor that Missoula County and the EPA will look to in order to determine whether to impose regulations on Pyramid and residential wood stove use in Seeley Lake in an effort to improve air quality.

No one is a fan of being regulated – having a stranger tell you how you can or cannot heat your home. And so it is important that we take every action we can to avoid being deemed “out of attainment” and, thus, face regulations.

Fortunately, there are some tax credit opportunities that would improve our air quality and help us avoid regulation. Both the federal government and the State of Montana are offering tax credits for both the purchase and installation of a new, high-efficiency wood stove and the purchase of weatherization materials that make homes more energy efficient.

The federal government is offering the “Biomass-burning Stove Tax Credit” to cover up to 30% of the cost of purchasing and installing a new, high-efficiency wood stove, up to \$1500. In order to qualify for this tax credit, the stove you purchase must be at least 75% efficient. The retailer that you work with will help you find a stove that fits this criterion. This credit applies only to your existing, principal residence and expires at the end of 2010. To receive the credit, simply keep the receipt for your purchase and installation, and claim the deduction on your taxes.

The State of Montana has a similar program called the “Alternative Energy System Credit.” This credit pays up to \$500 for an individual who owns a home and up to \$1000 for a couple who owns a home jointly. To receive this credit, keep all your receipts and fill out form ENRG-B to file with your taxes. This form is available online and at the Clearwater Resource Council office behind Montana Lakes Real Estate.

Together, the federal and state wood stove credits could pay up to \$2500 of the cost of a new wood stove and, when used in conjunction with each other, could enable you to purchase and install a new, high-efficiency wood stove for free.

There are also tax incentives from both the federal government and the State of Montana for weatherizing your home. The federal government is offering a tax credit of 30% of the cost of materials

for weatherization of existing homes, up to \$1500. The State of Montana has a similar “Energy Conservation Installation” tax credit that pays up to \$500 of the cost of weatherization materials for an individual owning a home (up to \$1000 for a couple owning a home jointly). The Montana tax credit applies to both new and existing homes. Eligible expenses for both programs include insulation, new energy efficient windows, storm doors and insulated exterior doors, caulking and weather stripping, and programmable thermostats. To obtain these credits, simply keep your receipts, claim the expenses on your tax return, and, for the State of Montana, fill out tax form ENRG-C. This form, along with more information about eligible weatherization expenses, is available at the CRC office.

In considering whether to take advantage of these tax credits, it is important to understand the difference between a tax credit and a tax deduction. A tax credit lowers your actual tax bill dollar-for-dollar, whereas a tax deduction is an expense or amount you can deduct from your taxable income. In general, a tax credit is more valuable than a similar tax deduction. These federal and state tax credits will decrease the amount you owe in taxes, or increase the amount of your tax refund, by up to \$2500.

CRC recognizes that, even with these tax credits, a new, high-efficiency wood stove may still be out of reach for some people. That is why we are exploring grant possibilities to cover the remaining cost of a new wood stove. If you are interested in a new wood stove but need help beyond the tax credit, please contact CRC at 677-0069. The more interested people there are, the more likely we are to be able to obtain funding to help. You may also contact CRC with any additional questions about these tax credits and to obtain the forms necessary to process the credits.

While we may not be able to determine what data Missoula County and the EPA uses to decide if Seeley Lake is “out of attainment,” we can take these proactive measures to reduce the particulates in our air and, thus, reduce the likelihood that our use of wood stoves will become regulated.

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