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Get 'energy smart,' save money and help the environment this summer

Sarasota County is challenging citizens to get "energy smart" in their cars and their homes over the next few months by participating in two initiatives from the National Association of Counties (NACo). The first is a fuel-efficiency campaign aimed at keeping more money in drivers' pockets by reducing the number of costly trips to the pump. The second aims to reduce America's energy consumption.

The "Drive Smarter Challenge" was launched by NACo, The Wal-Mart Foundation and 16 public and private-sector partners to help U.S. consumers lower their gasoline costs by using less. It offers effective money- and gas-saving tips in English and Spanish and extensive additional resources. Sarasota County has accepted the challenge to see which county in each of three population-size categories can get the highest percentage of residents and employees to take the Drive Smarter Challenge. Each individual who takes the challenge at www.drivesmarterchallenge.org will receive coupons from Exxon Mobil and AutoZone for fuel-saving products. The winning county will receive 1,000 bottles of fuel additive and cleaner products from AutoZone to distribute to its citizens.

Sarasota County is also participating in the annual ENERGY STAR® "Change the World, Start with ENERGY STAR" campaign, which challenges counties to collect the greatest number of pledges from residents committing to change one light in their home to one that's earned the ENERGY STAR label for energy efficiency.

Lighting accounts for an estimated 20 percent of the typical home's electricity use. Switching to energy-efficient options can significantly reduce greenhouse gases, save energy and protect the environment. ENERGY STAR's compact fluorescent bulbs (CFL) meet strict energy-efficiency ratings that could save more than \$30 a year in energy costs over the life of the bulb. By some estimates, changing just one incandescent light bulb to an ENERGY STAR-labeled CFL in every home in Florida could save enough energy to light every home in Tallahassee for more than 2.5 years. It would prevent more than 555 million pounds of greenhouse gases, an impact similar to removing 48,000 cars from Florida's roads.

Through Nov. 30, residents who pledge online at www.greencounties.org/changetheworld receive a 10 percent discount from Office Depot on its store brand CFLs.

For more information about energy efficient products for home and office, visit the ENERGY STAR Web site at www.energystar.gov. To calculate annual gas savings with the Drive Smarter Challenge, visit <http://drivesmarterchallenge.org/default.aspx>. The Web site also features links to extensive resources ranging from where to find the cheapest local gas to information on public transportation, biking, car sharing, and carpooling.

To learn more about Sarasota County's sustainability initiatives, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000.