

## **Contractors want federal money for water projects**

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Wisconsin companies are warning Congress should encourage water conservation projects before resource shortages become a nationwide crisis.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency predicts 36 states will have water shortages by 2013, but the push to promote water conservation has not floated to the top of Congress' agenda when deciding how to spend money, said Rob Zimmerman, senior staff engineer-water conservation initiatives for Kohler Co., Kohler. Construction and environmental groups are trying to overcome that hurdle as they lobby Congress for a program to give money to homeowners who install efficient toilets and faucets, he said. "Even though it's not on everybody's radar screen, it's going to be," Zimmerman said.

It is on the radar for Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., and Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J., as they seek co-sponsors for a federal bill that would offer rebates to residents who buy and install water-efficient fixtures. A representative from Miller's office said the proposed bill - soon to be introduced - will create the program, but Congress must dedicate money to it in a separate vote.

The Wisconsin Association of Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Inc. last week visited Washington, D.C., to support the idea of raising money, possibly through tax deductions, for the incentive program. "Some of the pushback that I heard a little bit is, of course, 'Where does the money come from?'" said Dan Callies, president of Oak Creek Plumbing Inc. and vice president of the association. "Some people don't agree with the tax credit philosophy." Although Wisconsin is not on the list of 36 states facing water shortages, state leaders should take steps now to save as much water as possible, Callies said. "In our area around here, because of course we have Lake Michigan right beside us, we're not seeing the effects," he said.

Some local utilities in Wisconsin, including those in Waukesha and Madison, offer grants to homeowners who install new fixtures. But raising money locally is a challenge, just as it is at the federal level, Zimmerman said. Of 535 Wisconsin water utilities the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin surveyed in 2008, 66 percent said it is unlikely or very unlikely they will provide rebates or other incentives to residential customers by 2011 to increase water efficiency. At the federal level, Kohler Co. and other supporters of the incentive program want to build on an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act program giving money to building projects promoting energy and water efficiency, Zimmerman said. Water conservation is on Congress' agenda, he said, but the cost of incentive programs to promote conservation projects make it tough to free up money, he said.

It would cost \$10 billion if the federal government supplied a \$100 grant to every U.S. household with an old, low-efficiency toilet, Zimmerman said. "It's not seen yet as a national problem and, for the price tag we're talking about, I wonder if it's going to go," he said. "They may kick it back to the states to spend how they want to."