

Boston Globe editorial

Two facts are driving the Obama administration's "cash for caulkers" proposal to offer homeowners rebates for energy-saving projects. The first is that 17 percent of the nation's construction workers are still unemployed and could use the work. The second is that homes are responsible for 21 percent of the nation's carbon dioxide emissions, twice as much as passenger cars. President Obama should send a bill to Congress as quickly as possible to get the program up and running.

In one sense, "cash for caulkers" is a misnomer. Caulking is just a small part of what the typical drafty house needs, and installing wall insulation, upgrading heating systems, replacing windows, and repairing ducts are jobs for trained workers, not do-it-yourselfers.

But the administration would still be wise to use the "cash for caulkers" moniker, recalling as it does the popular "cash for clunkers" program. One reason the latter succeeded in getting Americans to buy more fuel-efficient cars is that Congress was able to make the money available quickly, without extensive rule-making. That is also the plan for the new program, whose more official name is Home Star.

The administration proposal leans heavily on a similar program in the climate-change bill that is stalled in the Senate after passage by the House last summer. Homeowners could get rebates as high as 50 percent for retrofitting projects that cut energy use. Home Star would also offer incentives to contractors, building-supply retailers, and builders to get them to spur demand among homeowners. Under one plan, the program would draw on some of the \$23 billion in bank-bailout money that has already been returned.

The payoff in energy conservation and reduced greenhouse gas emissions would be substantial. According to a memorandum by the President's Economic Recovery Advisory Board, retrofitting can reduce most households' energy consumption by 10 percent to 40 percent. In the energy-efficiency world, this is the lowest-hanging fruit of all, and American workers would do the picking - the jobs can't be outsourced. "Cash for caulkers" deserves the highest priority from Congress.