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Why power company gave away free light bulbs

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The message on the website of Illinois Rep. Ron Stephens offered free light bulbs starting April 1.

It was not an April Fools' Day joke.

Ameren gave away 70,000 light bulbs to Stephens and 50 other legislators in its Illinois service areas. The power company told each to distribute the bulbs to constituents "in a manner he or she deemed appropriate."

Stephens handed out 100 bulbs at churches. He gave away the remaining 650 on a first-come, first-served basis, limited to four per household. They were gone in less than a week.

Some consumers suspect that Ameren was trying to curry favor at a time when the company wants to increase electricity rates in Illinois by \$247 million.

Stephens, R-Highland, views the light bulb giveaway as a chance to help constituents save a few bucks.

"Far be it for me to look a gift horse in the mouth," he says. "I'm still just as critical of their rate increase as I was before."

Ameren says giving away the light bulbs is good for the company as well as consumers.

The freebies are energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs. They are said to use as much as 75 percent less energy as standard incandescent bulbs, produce 75 percent less heat and last up to 10 times longer. Ameren says customers can save \$30 or more in electricity costs over the life of each bulb.

In Missouri, Ameren plans to give away 5,000 electroluminescent night lights on Sunday at the Earth Day celebration in Forest Park. The night lights emit a soft, diffuse light that Ameren says could save consumers \$16 over their lifetime, compared with a 4-watt incandescent bulb.

While the night lights are cheap, Ameren says, the giveaway and other energy programs illustrate the company's commitment to saving energy.

Ameren says that will become even more important during the next decade, when it expects to build a new power plant in Missouri, probably a nuclear one.

"It is in our best interests to work with customers now on efficiency to reduce the base load (of energy use) in the future," says Steve Kidwell, vice president for regulatory affairs.

Ameren says it recently gave away 30,000 CFL bulbs through social-services agencies to low-income Missouri customers, at a cost of about \$50,000.

The company might bill that amount to customers, although a decision hasn't been made, Kidwell says.

The state official who represents Missouri consumers says encouraging efficiency is good. But before giving away tens of thousands of light bulbs, power companies "need to know if it makes sense and if it's cost effective," says Lewis Mills, head of the Office of Public Counsel.

"Ultimately, all the money that they get comes out of (customer) rates," Mills adds.

From 2003 through 2007, Ameren sold 267,000 CFL bulbs through Ace Hardware and other Missouri retailers at a heavily discounted price: 99 cents each. A study done for Ameren in June calculates the cost at \$493,003.

Ameren says it paid the entire bill and the payback was big: a saving of an estimated 80,000 megawatt-hours, enough to power 6,700 Missouri homes for a year.

"As we have higher costs and have to pass them on to consumers, energy efficiency saves them money," Ameren spokeswoman Susan Gallagher says.

In Illinois, Ameren says it is paying for the 70,000 light bulbs it gave legislators.

David Kolata, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board, representing Illinois consumers, says: "Handing out bulbs in the wake of last year's rate-hike rebellion and while the company pushes a new \$247 million increase seems a thinly veiled PR ploy to muster goodwill as it asks for yet another rate hike."

Still, Kolata advises consumers to say "yes" to anyone offering free energy-saving light bulbs.

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