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Ottawa to offer incentives to retire old cars: Baird

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Nathan Denette/National Post

TORONTO -- The federal government is about to announce rewards for drivers who scrap their old gas-guzzling vehicles, Environment Minister John Baird said on Wednesday.

Mr. Baird admitted it is a "huge challenge" to persuade Canadians to change their behaviour to help combat climate change. But he said the Conservative government is pursuing numerous options, including incentives for individuals who get rid of old and inefficient vehicles.

"We will have an initiative in the coming weeks on that," Mr. Baird told the Economic Club of Toronto.

Environmentalists contend a 12-year-old vehicle produces 17 times more pollutants as one built today.

Approximately five million of the 18 million personal vehicles operating in Canada today were made prior to 1995.

Mr. Baird offered no details of the government's plan Wednesday but, the Conservatives have already set aside \$6-million as part of the 2007 budget announced in March to fund a vehicle retirement program. A discussion paper released this summer outlines a number of possible incentives that could be offered, ranging from cash to free public transit passes to rebates on the purchase of new, fuel-efficient vehicles.

"The incentive options offered through this new program will aim to accelerate the removal of older vehicles from the road and to encourage Canadians to consider sustainable transportation alternatives," the document states.

Several organizations already offer vehicle retirement programs across the country, including Scrap-it in Vancouver, Cash for Clunkers in Kelowna, B.C., Bye Bye Beaters in Winnipeg and Car Heaven, which operates nationwide.

Fatima Dharsee, Car Heaven's program manager, said the government has consulted her organization as it develops its own plan.

For the program to succeed, she said it will need to include a range of rewards.

"The right thing to do is to offer a suite of incentives, because there are families of four who want to participate and do the right thing, but for them, offering a transit pass that only works for one person won't fit their lifestyle," she said.

Scrap-it, Canada's first vehicle retirement program, was established in Vancouver more than a decade ago.

Through Scrap-it, drivers with cars built before 1993 are given \$1,000 towards the purchase of a new hybrid vehicle, \$500 for the purchase of a bicycle, a free transit pass for 18 months or other rewards. To qualify, individuals fill in an application form and then deliver their car to a designated recycling yard.

During his speech, Mr. Baird said the government is pursuing other measures to reduce the amount of pollutants produced by cars, including new standards mandatory for automobiles and a "clean auto pact" between Canada and the United States.

"If we move together with the United States, we can go farther, faster," Mr. Baird said.

The minister's comments come as international delegates gather in Bali, Indonesia to begin work on a new international treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Mr. Baird reiterated his government's position that any treaty must be signed by all the world's major producers of greenhouse gases and that the negotiations must be kept on a tight schedule.

Mr. Baird's speech was interrupted by a member of Ecosanity, an environmental group, who displayed a sign reading "liar" and condemned the minister for "sacrificing" future generations on behalf of big business.

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