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## Utility Co. Will Offer Rebates for Robots

By [Nate Traylor](#)

In July, San Diego Gas & Electric will become the first public utility company in the nation to offer a rebate program for robotic cleaners.

A power provider to 3.4 million people, the company will offer \$200 to customers who opt for energy-efficient robotic pool cleaners.

To further sweeten the deal, SDG&E will kick in an extra \$50 when customers choose to install a robotic cleaner *and* a variable-speed pump, which is also eligible for a \$200 rebate. That's an incentive totaling \$450.

First, a couple of unknowns:

It's not clear how much money SDG&E has budgeted for the program. A spokesperson said that is still being finalized; however, a source close to the company believes it will start out small, aiming for approximately 500 upgrades.

It's also yet to be determined which makes or models will be eligible.

However, industry members have no reason to believe that the program will be limited to a specific brand or type of robotic cleaner. In addition, California utilities typically wouldn't exclude products "unless there were some systemic energy-efficiency differences," said Gary Fernstrom, a consultant for Pacific Power & Gas.

His experience is that all robotic cleaners achieve relatively the same energy savings. By virtue of operating directly from a low-voltage power source, a robotic cleaner can sweep up debris while the variable-speed pump operates at a low flow rate — unlike hydraulic cleaners, which require a booster pump that can jack up power consumption.

Several years ago, San Francisco-based PP&G looked into expanding its rebate program to include robotic cleaners and tasked Fernstrom to study their energy-savings potential. He concluded that a robotic cleaner, working in conjunction with a variable-speed pump, consumes 1,478 to 2,792 kilowatt-hours less than a hydraulic cleaner paired with a single-speed pump.

If the program is proven successful, it's likely other utilities will adopt similar measures.

"I can see that," said Jeff Farlow, program manager of energy initiatives at Pentair Aquatic Systems. "I would be surprised if it didn't, but I don't think it will be as widespread as [rebate programs for] pumps."

Mark Normyle concurs.

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"I would hope some of the other ones, particularly in California, would duplicate this to achieve the same sort of energy savings," said Hayward Pools' product manager for automatic pool cleaners. "It would be in their best interests."

Obviously, it's in manufacturers' best interests, too.

While Zodiac Pool Systems anticipates a spike in robotic cleaner sales, marketing director Tessa McHenry believes California will remain very much a hydraulic cleaner market.

"In Southern California we have a year-round swimming season and that's not always ideal for robotic cleaners," she said, adding that it's generally recommended that they be taken out of the pool after each use, "unlike a pressure-side cleaner, which is intended to live in the pool all the time."

Some question whether \$200 up-front savings is enough of an incentive. One San Diego retailer, who declined to be identified, said he doesn't carry the machines because customers are overwhelmingly in favor of the more affordable, conventional cleaner.

Alicia Pagliaroli doesn't share that view.

"I can see it being very effective," said the assistant manager of Kohler Pool & Spa Supply in Encinitas.

She hopes SDG&E rebates do for robotic cleaners what they've done for variable-speed pumps.

"It's one of the huge sort of hooks that we have," Pagliaroli added.

SDG&E issued 2,280 rebates for energy-efficient pumps last year and nearly 1,300 so far this year.

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