

IRS Warns of Rebate Scams

Identity thieves use economic stimulus plan to steal personal information over the phone, Internet.

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Even before Congress passes an economic stimulus package, identity thieves are using promises of tax rebates to trick people into revealing financial and personal data, the Internal Revenue Service warned Wednesday.

Under one scheme, the IRS said, people are receiving phone calls telling them they can only receive a rebate if they provide bank account information for a direct deposit.

The tax agency stressed that it does not collect information by telephone and that no legislation has been enacted that would allow it to provide advance payments to taxpayers or that specifies the details of those payments.

The House last week, as part of an economic stimulus package, approved tax rebates of \$600 and \$1,200 respectively for most individuals and couples, with another \$300 per child. The Senate is now considering a slightly different version.

The IRS also repeated past warnings of e-mails, supposedly coming from the agency, where people are asked to enter personal information on a form needed to obtain a tax refund.

A new scam, it said, involves an e-mail notification that a person's tax return will be audited with instructions to click on links to complete forms with personal and account information.

Businesses and accountants are also getting e-mails with instructions to download information on tax law changes. Clicking on these links could download "malware" onto the recipient's computer that gives the scammer remote access to the computer hard drive.

In another telephone scam, a caller claims to be an IRS employee who says the taxpayer has not cashed a refund check and asks the person to verify his or her bank account number.

On Tuesday, at a Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing for Douglas Shulman, the nominee to be IRS commissioner, Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., expressed concern that taxpayers would be victimized by tax preparers and lenders who charge high interest rates for short-term advances on their stimulus rebates.

The IRS advised people not to click on any link from an e-mail purporting to come from the tax agency. People receiving questionable e-mails can contact the IRS through phishing@irs.gov.