Watch out for tax scams as filing season opens

Aggressive and threatening phone calls by criminals impersonating IRS agents remain near the top of the annual "Dirty Dozen" list of tax scams for the 2015 filing season, the Internal Revenue Service announced this week.

The IRS has seen a surge of these phone scams in recent months as scam artists threaten police arrest, deportation, license revocation and other things. The IRS reminds taxpayers to guard against all sorts of con games that arise during any filing season.

"If someone calls unexpectedly claiming to be from the IRS with aggressive threats if you don't pay immediately, it's a scam artist calling," said IRS Commissioner John Koskinen. "The first IRS contact with taxpayers is usually through the mail. Taxpayers have rights, and this is not how we do business."

The Dirty Dozen is compiled annually by the IRS and lists a variety of common scams taxpayers may encounter any time during the year. Many of these con games peak during filing season as people prepare their tax returns or hire someone to do so. This year for the first time, the IRS will issue the individual Dirty Dozen scams one at a time during the next 12 business days to raise consumer awareness.

Phone scams top the list this year because it has been a persistent and pervasive problem for many taxpayers for many months.

Scammers are able to alter caller ID numbers to make it look like the IRS is calling. They use fake names and bogus IRS badge numbers. They often leave "urgent" callback requests.

They prey on the most vulnerable people, such as the elderly, newly arrived immigrants and those whose first language is not English. Scammers have been known to impersonate agents from IRS Criminal Investigation as well.

"These criminals try to scare and shock you into providing personal financial information on the spot while you are off guard," Koskinen said. "Don't be taken in and don't engage these people over the phone."

The Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) has received reports of roughly 290,000 contacts since October 2013 and has become aware of nearly 3,000 victims who have collectively paid over $14 million as a result of the scam, in which individuals make unsolicited calls to taxpayers fraudulently claiming to be IRS officials and demanding that they send them cash via prepaid debit cards.

As telephone scams continue across the country, the IRS recently put out a new YouTube video with a renewed warning to taxpayers not to be fooled by imposters posing as tax agency representatives. The new Tax Scams video describes some basic tips to help protect taxpayers from tax scams.

These callers may demand money or may say you have a refund due and try to trick you into sharing private information. These con artists can sound convincing when they call. They may know a lot about you.

The IRS reminds people that they can know pretty easily when a supposed IRS caller is a fake.

Here are five things the scammers often do but the IRS will not do. Any one of these five things is a tell-tale sign of a scam.

The IRS will never:

• Call to demand immediate payment, nor will the agency call about taxes owed without first having mailed you a bill.

• Demand that you pay taxes without giving you the opportunity to question or appeal the amount they say you owe.

• Require you to use a specific payment method for your taxes, such as a prepaid debit card.

• Ask for credit or debit card numbers over the phone.

• Threaten to bring in local police or other law-enforcement groups to have you arrested for not paying.

If you get a phone call from someone claiming to be from the IRS and asking for money, here's what you should do:

• If you know you owe taxes or think you might owe, call the IRS at 1-800-829-1040. The IRS workers can help you with a payment issue.

• If you know you don't owe taxes or have no reason to believe that you do, report the incident to the TIGTA at 1-800-366-4484 or at www.tigta.gov.

• If you've been targeted by this scam, also contact the Federal Trade Commission and use their "FTC Complaint Assistant" at FTC.gov. Please add "IRS Telephone Scam" to the comments of your complaint.

Remember, too, the IRS does not use email, text messages or any social media to discuss your personal tax issue involving bills or refunds.

For more information on reporting tax scams, go to www.irs.gov and type "scam" in the search box.

Additional information about tax scams is available on IRS social media sites, including YouTube www.youtube.com/irsvideos and Tumblr http://internalrevenueservice.tumblr.com, where people can search "scam" to find all the scam-related posts.

Tax help available at district offices

Tax season is under way, and the Oregon Department of Revenue would like to remind taxpayers that assistance is available at five district offices throughout the state and the agency's main office in Salem.

Taxpayers can receive help from Revenue employees 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday at the following locations:

• Bend — 951 SW Simpson Ave., Suite 100, 541-388-6139

• Eugene — 1600 Valley River Drive, Suite 310, 541-686-7935

• Medford — 3613 Aviation Way, Suite 102, 541-858-6500

• Gresham — 1550 NW Eastman Parkway, Suite 220, 503-674-6272

• Portland — 800 NE Oregon St., Suite 505, 971-673-0700

• Salem — 955 Center St. NE, 503-378-4988

Employees in Revenue's district offices provide a wide array of services for Oregonians preparing their 2013 state taxes. Auditors are available to answer tax return questions and help clarify state tax law. Revenue agents can set up payment plans and provide information about account balances and past due returns.

People who don't want to mail their income tax return can drop it off at a district office, and make any income tax payments they might owe the state.

District office staff also can direct people to tax assistance not provided by Revenue. The agency does not prepare tax returns, but staff can steer them to organizations that provide free tax preparation.

In addition to the district offices you can visit www.oregon.gov/dor to get tax forms, check the status of your refund or make tax payments, or call 1-800-356-4222 toll-free.

Processing state, federal tax filing for 2015 begins

Taxpayers encouraged to e-file their returns this year.

SALEM — The 2015 tax filing season has begun for both the Oregon Department of Revenue and the Internal Revenue Service.

Both agencies began accepting returns electronically and processing all returns on Jan. 20. Revenue encourages Oregon taxpayers to e-file their state and federal tax returns.

"Taxpayers can get their refunds sooner if they e-file," said Ken Ross, manager of the Personal Income Tax program. "You can get your refund in seven to 10 business days, instead of the six to eight weeks it takes to get your refund if you file a paper return."

Other e-filing benefits include: Fewer errors, faster return processing, quicker and safer return transmission, and acknowledgement of receipt from Revenue and the IRS.

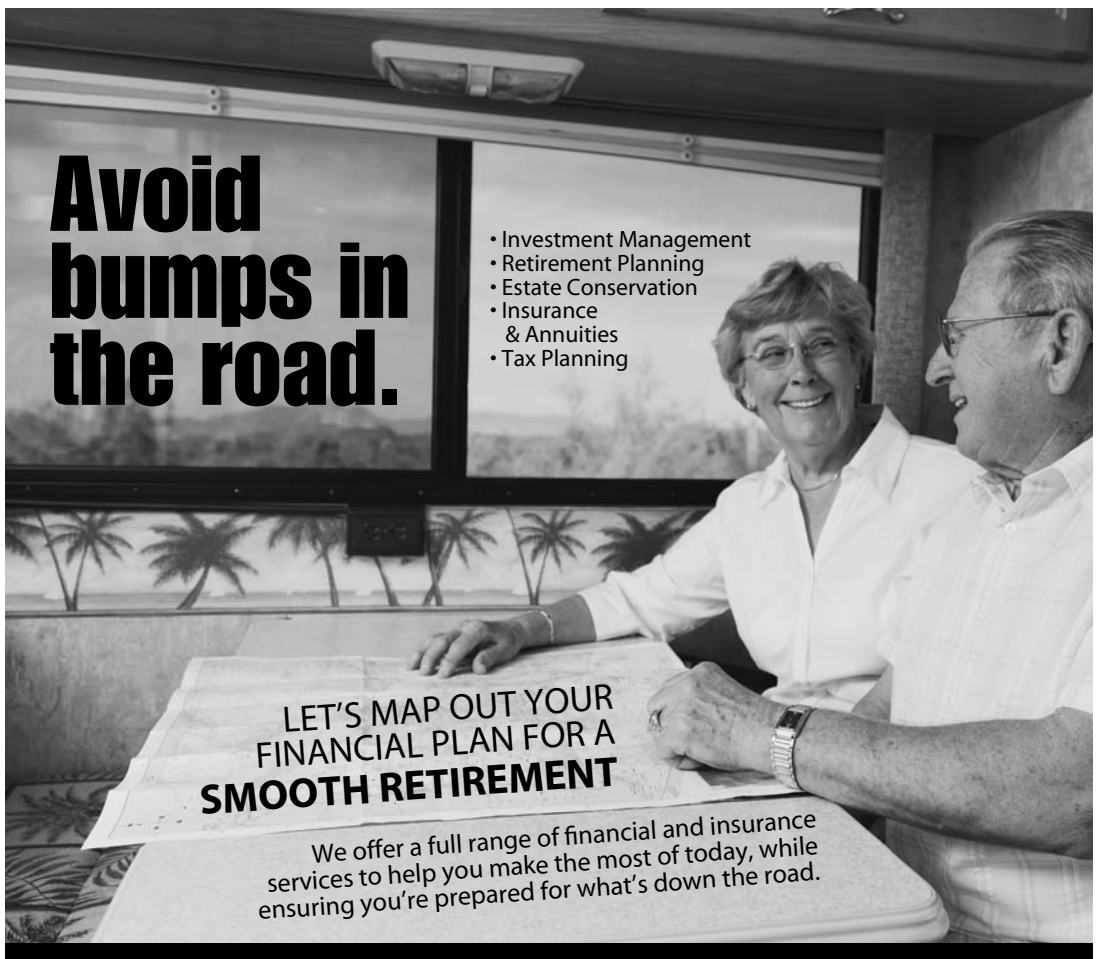
There are a number of e-filing software options.

Oregon has teamed up with the IRS Free File Alliance, which means some of the Oregon-approved online tax preparation sites offer free e-filing for federal and Oregon returns.

For more information on e-filing, visit www.oregon.gov/dor/e-filing.

Visit www.oregon.gov/dor to get tax forms, check the status of your refund, or make tax payments; or call 1-800-356-4222 toll-free from an Oregon prefix (English or Spanish); 503-378-4988 in Salem and outside Oregon; or email questions.dor@oregon.gov.

For TTY (hearing or speech impaired), call 1-800-886-7204.



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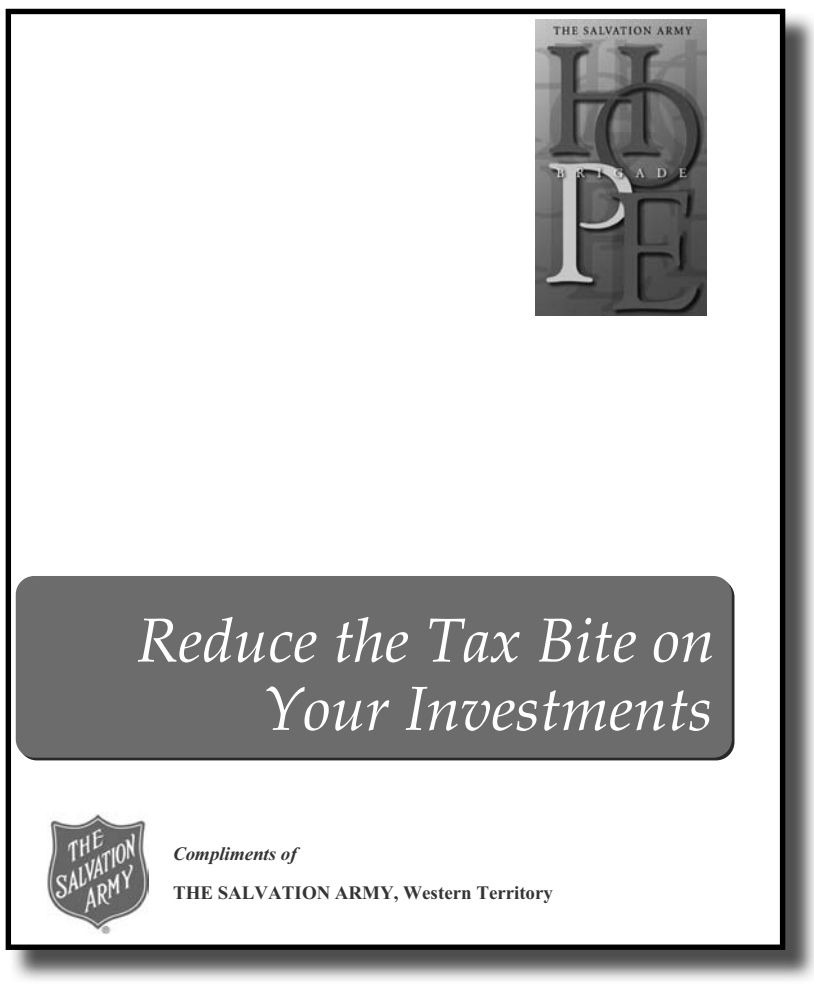

• Tax Facts You Should Know
• Avoid Short-Term Gains
• Trade Stocks for a Gift Annuity
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