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ENVIRONETDAILY

Consumers in dark over risks of new light bulbs

Push for energy-saving fluorescents ignores mercury disposal hazards

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By Joseph Farah

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..."Currently the need to recycle mercury in fluorescent lamps isn't mentioned on the Energy Star web page although they are working with the Office of Solid Waste to address this," the memo continues. "This may create confusion to the public about doing the right thing."

In fact, even the memo doesn't advise what the public should do.

No question about it, though. You as a consumer will be required to find certified waste recycling centers to turn in your dead and broken bulbs.

The American Lighting Association has some ideas. It has created a list of five considerations that should be weighed by all legislative bodies considering bans on incandescent bulbs.

The association of American manufacturers and retail outlets suggests any such legislation include the following provisions:

1. a lumen per watt energy efficiency standard should be established rather than a ban on a specific type of product. It should include a 10-year goal
2. halogen bulbs should be exempted
3. incandescent bulbs 40 watts or less should be exempt
4. collection and disposal plans for mercury-based CFLs should be made prior to any ban;
5. persuade consumers through education rather than coerce them through limiting choices

Governments may indeed be promoting a kind of lighting that is itself nearly obsolete. Fluorescent lights are nothing new. They've been around for a long time. And while they may save money, some say the public hasn't chosen them for good reasons – including, but not limited to, the mercury issue.

Some experts predict the next generation of lighting, though, is LED lights. They are made from semiconductor materials that emit light when an electrical current flows through them. When this form of light takes over, all bulbs will be obsolete. Your wall tiles can light up. Curtains and drapes can light up. Even your dining room table could be made to light up – at exactly the level you want.

That's what is ahead in the next decade, according to some in the industry.

Nobody promoted CFLs as aggressively as IKEA. Not only does the retailer sell them, it also provides one of the very few recycling centers for the burned out bulbs. But even with a plethora of recycling centers, how will the public view the prospect of saving up dead bulbs and transporting them to recycling centers? And how about the danger of breakage in that process?

"The industry is currently aiming at totally mercury-free CFL lighting, but this is still five to 10 years away," admits IKEA.

Those who really care about this problem right now are those involved in the waste industry.

"Most agree more energy-efficient light bulbs can significantly curb air pollution, but fewer people are talking about how to deal with them at the end of their lives," explained a page 1 story in the April 2 issue of Waste News. It goes on to explain "there is no plan to address air and water pollution concerns that could develop if consumers improperly dispose of the mercury-containing devices."