



February 6, 2007

Letters to the Editor  
San Jose Mercury News  
Via email & fax

Dear Editor:

As water quality professionals who are also deeply concerned about climate change, we were thrilled to see your story about compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) vs incandescent bulbs and proposed bans on incandescents ("Bright Idea? Bill to Ban Old Bulbs" January 31).

However, as agencies working to protect the health of San Francisco Bay and other local waters, we are concerned that while **CFLs** save energy **and should definitely be used in homes in place of traditional lightbulbs**, they also contain mercury, which has the potential to find its way into the environment when lamps break, usually during disposal in landfills. Mercury is a neurotoxin and a public health threat. Consequently, state regulations define CFLs as hazardous waste, which must be recycled once they are spent.

An estimated 13 million fluorescent bulbs are disposed of in the Bay Area each year, and it's estimated that less than 2% of the CFLs that are used are ever recycled. The dilemma that water quality agencies must address with their fellow hazardous waste and solid waste professionals is that while every county in the Bay Area has a household hazardous waste (HHW) collection facility, less than 10% of the households in any jurisdiction actually use these programs.

This is because HHW programs do not have adequate funding or infrastructure to comprehensively capture these wastes that are generated in homes and businesses everywhere, and industry is not required to take accountability for the full life cycle of their products. Regulatory requirements for HHW collection result in limited operating hours, fixed venues that are not easily accessible to the public, and limited outreach. Recent legislative changes that ban certain wastes from landfills and direct them towards HHW programs are further burdening the system.

The good news is that work is being done on this complex issue. The recently-formed California Product Stewardship Council, comprised of public agency hazardous waste, storm and wastewater, and solid waste programs, is working to expand industry

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responsibility for a product from purchase to disposal. This kind of extended producer responsibility is going to be needed if CFLs do become the norm for consumers.

Bottom line: CFLs are a terrific choice for the consumer and the environment. Now coordinated action is needed to figure out how to best handle the logistics of properly disposing of them when they *finally* do burn out. Public-private coordination will ensure that we are dealing appropriately with all the complex aspects of environmental stewardship.

Sincerely,

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