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How to recycle your bulbs

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Millions of Bay Area residents are doing their part to save energy by using compact fluorescent bulbs. But when those bulbs burn out, there's a big question mark about what happens next. The State of California has made it illegal to throw fluorescent lights in the trash and pressure is on to find a convenient alternative.

Compact fluorescent bulbs are lighting the way to energy savings at homes all over the Bay Area.

PG&E thinks the bulbs are so beneficial, they gave away a million last year for free.

"They use less energy than an incandescent bulb. They last longer, and as a result, there is less electricity required," says Rex Bell from PG&E.

But along with the benefits, fluorescents come with a challenge.

"They can't be put in the trash, because they do contain mercury." Leonard Robinson from the Department of Toxic Substances Control,

The State Department of Toxic Substances has banned fluorescent lights from landfills. That includes the big tubes, the little curly ones known as CFLs and lots of sizes and shapes in between. All of them contain small amounts of mercury.

"If it gets into the environment, it starts to break down because of bacteria in soil or water, turns into ethyl mercury, at which point that enters into the food chain," says Michael Scahill of the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District.

So if you can't throw them out, what do you do with them?

It's not a secret. It's just that there is no statewide plan for handling fluorescents when they burn out. You are supposed to recycle them. But you can't throw them in a cart with the rest of your recycling because they might break and the mercury would escape.

That means local governments are left holding the bag, trying to figure out how to make it convenient for people to recycle fluorescents -- and how to pay for it.

"There are no solutions except for what jurisdictions like ours have invented," says Santa Clara County Hazardous Materials program manager Rob D'Arcy.

Residents can bring their used tubes and CFL's to many Santa Clara County hardware stores and the stores will collect them. Then, county workers carefully pack them up, and take them away for recycling. The program is working -- almost too well.

"With more than 30 stores now, it has, to put it mildly, overwhelmed my staff," says D'Arcy.

Other communities are also trying to find solutions. In Central Contra Costa County, residents can drop their fluorescents at a household hazardous waste center. But, for many, it's a long drive and it costs the county sanitary district a bundle -- about 75 cents to recycle each CFL and 25 cents a foot for the tubes. So now, a growing number of government officials want manufacturers step up to help.

"Oh absolutely, they are the ones who profit from it. So that's absolutely where the money should come from," says D'Arcy.

A long meeting at the California Environmental Protection Agency was devoted to getting businesses to help recycle fluorescents. That's been a tough sell up to now, but a representative from Sylvania seemed to open the door -- at least a little.

"Teamwork and shared responsibility. We can not do this alone. We are willing to lead the discussion of how this can be done," says Jennifer Dolin from the Sylvania Environmental Marketing.

In the end, it's likely consumers will pay most of the cost of recycling. Sylvania suggests customers be charged a recycling fee when they buy the bulbs.

PG&E is proposing a small fee be added to utility bills.

"There will not be a noticeable increase in the bill amount and yet there will be benefit to the consumer and benefit to the environment," says Bell.

Another proposal is a mail back program. You would buy special box and plastic bag, put in your bulbs and send it to a recycler. Whatever the eventual solution - the message right now is that fluorescent lights need to be recycled and you have to do your homework to figure out how.

Local governments estimate only about five to ten percent of fluorescent bulbs are being properly recycled. If you want to find out how to recycle in your community click on these links below.

[Earth 911](#)

[BayWise](#)

[Cleaning Up Broken Fluorescent Lights](#): There is a lot of misinformation circulating about how to handle broken lights. To find out what the California Department of Toxic Substances Control recommends, go to:

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