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Australia Plans to Phase Out Incandescent Lights

By TIM JOHNSTON

SYDNEY, Feb. 20 — Australia intends to phase out incandescent light bulbs completely within three years, the country's environment minister said today.

The minister, Malcolm Turnbull, said the government would use both persuasion and regulation to get the whole country to switch to compact fluorescent bulbs, which use less energy, as part of its drive to cut down on the amount of "greenhouse" gases, implicated in [global warming](#), that it releases into the atmosphere.

"The most effective and immediate way we can reduce greenhouse-gas emissions is by using energy more efficiently," Mr. Turnbull said. "Electric lighting is a vital part of our lives; globally, it generates emissions equal to 70 percent of those from all the world's passenger vehicles."

Australia already imposes minimum efficiency standards on many kinds of electrical appliances. A similar system will be applied to light bulbs, Mr. Turnbull said, and the standards would be steadily tightened to the point where it will ultimately be impossible to sell ordinary incandescent bulbs that meet them.

Mr. Turnbull said the government would consider making some exceptions to the restrictions for special applications like medical lighting and oven lights where compact fluorescent bulbs cannot be substituted.

Australia has also used similar methods to eliminate full-flow shower heads and full-size lavatory cisterns, to conserve water.

Sarah Stock, a spokeswoman for Mr. Turnbull, said the first step would be to encourage manufacturers, importers, wholesalers and retailers to make ample supplies of appropriate fluorescent bulbs available and to cut back on incandescents.

"Once the main players have removed those inefficient products, that investment in better quality and more efficient product will be protected by regulation," Ms. Stock said. "The actual enforcement would be conducted by state and territory energy-efficiency and consumer protection agencies."

If it goes ahead, Australia would be the first country to try to completely eliminate incandescent lighting, although last month, state legislators in California suggested a similar measure.

The plan appears to face no significant political hurdles. The main opposition party in the national parliament has enthusiastically welcomed it.

"I think it's a good idea, and I give it my 100 percent support," the opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, told a local radio station.

Environmental groups are pleased, particularly considering that the ruling center-right government led by John Howard has until recently been unwilling to agree that human activity is changing the climate.

“This sounds like it’s going to be a concrete step,” said Mark Wakeham, an energy campaigner with [Greenpeace](#) Australia. “It seems the government has finally woken up to the fact that we need legislative steps to reduce emissions.”

Australia will hold a general election later this year, and opinion polls show that the environment is high on the list of voters’ concerns. The governing party has been trying to seize the ecological initiative from the opposition.

In the past four months the Howard government has revealed a major initiative to improve water management, said it would consider a national carbon-trading program and announced financing for major solar and wind-powered electric generation projects.

Mr. Howard says that by the time the light bulb plan is completed in 2015, Australia will emit four million fewer tons of greenhouse gases a year, a reduction of 0.7 percent compared with 2004.

Incandescent bulbs are the kind invented by Thomas Edison in the dawn of the electric age. Current passes through a wire filament, which heats up and glows brightly. They are simple and inexpensive, but not very efficient — some 90 percent of the energy they use is converted to heat rather than light.

Fluorescent bulbs, on the other hand, work by passing an electrical current through a gas, usually argon. The gas molecules then emit ultraviolet light, which in turn causes a thin phosphorous coating on the inside of the tube to glow with visible light.

Fluorescent bulbs produce similar volumes of light using about 20 percent less energy, but they are not entirely benign for the environment. Among other things, they contain some mercury, perhaps one-fifth of the amount used in a watch battery. In Europe, a surcharge is imposed on the retail cost to pay for safe disposal of dead bulbs separately from ordinary trash.

Fluorescents are also about four times as expensive to manufacture as the incandescent bulbs they replace. But they are more durable, typically lasting 5 to 10 times as long as a comparable incandescent. So overall, they save money as well as power.

Although the lifetime cost savings make them popular with businesses, they have not caught on so much for home use. They cannot be used with many home lampshades that depend on a round incandescent bulb, and many people find their bluish light unflatteringly harsh and cool compared with the warm-looking yellow-white of an incandescent.

Jin Chew, who manages a hardware store in Sydney, said that incandescent bulbs still outsell fluorescents five to one in his shop, even though bulb manufacturers have tried to make the color of the fluorescent bulbs’ light more palatable.

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