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Maine Adopts First-in-the-nation Law to Recycle Mercury-containing Light Bulbs

New law protects families and the environment; saves taxpayer money

Thursday May 28th, 2009

The Maine House and Senate have voted to support a new, first-in-the-nation, law to help reduce mercury pollution by requiring compact fluorescent light bulb manufacturers to share the costs and responsibility for recycling their mercury-containing bulbs. Governor Baldacci is expected to sign Maine's bill soon. Similar bills are now pending in MA and VT.

"The Maine Legislature has once again demonstrated national leadership to prevent toxic pollution," said Matt Prindiville, Clean Production Project Director for the Natural Resources Council of Maine. "This bill gives consumers a quick, easy and free way to recycle energy-efficient light bulbs, and it will reduce mercury pollution, which can harm the health of Maine families and our environment. Mercury-containing bulbs need to be recycled, and this bill ensures ongoing funding for a collection program that works well for consumers and our environment."

"It was an honor to work with NRCM and with the Environmental Priorities Coalition as the sponsor of the two priority toxics bills of this legislative session," said Rep. Seth Berry, the bill's sponsor. With this bill, Maine twice reduces the mercury in our environment. First, we reduce our electrical consumption; second, we ensure that CFLs are correctly disposed of. Equally important, Maine once again demonstrates to the nation that it is good business practice for manufacturers to participate in the end life of the products they bring to market."

"This landmark law is an important step forward for Maine's environment," said Senator Kevin Raye, the lead co-sponsor of the bill. "People can feel good about buying energy efficient light bulbs knowing that the mercury they contain will be safely managed at the end of the bulb's useful life."

"Thanks to some good bipartisan work by the Legislature, Mainers will be able to enjoy the substantial benefits of compact florescent light bulbs, while sharing the responsibility of removing mercury from the waste stream," said Rep. Bob Duschene, House Chair of the Natural Resources Committee. "The Natural Resources Committee really worked hard on this one."

"We need to ensure that products that contain hazardous materials are safely managed at the end of their useful life," said Seth Goodall, Senate Chair of the Natural Resources Committee. "And, beyond that it makes sense to make more of our products from recycled materials. Every bulb collected through this program will be recycled into a new product. That's what sustainability is all about."

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"ecomaine is encouraged that with the passage of this bill, residents and businesses will know that compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) contain mercury and can't be thrown in the trash destined for landfills or waste-to-energy facilities," said Kevin Roche, General Manager of ecomaine, Greater Portland's solid waste cooperative. "For the good of our environment, we need to minimize the amount of mercury being put into the compact fluorescent bulbs and then get them returned for recycling after they've been used."

"Passage of the lamps legislation sends a clear message out nationally (and globally) that a new day is dawning for total life cycle management and shared responsibility-- from 'the cradle to the grave' for products containing mercury and other hazardous substances," said Mercury Policy Project Director Bender.

The Maine Legislature has a long record of successful initiatives to make sure that Maine reduces the amount of mercury and other hazardous materials released from consumer products. Over the last few years, Maine passed first-in-the-nation laws to require producers to:

- safely recycle mercury in auto switches;
- provide incentives for the safe recycling of mercury-containing thermostats;
- ensure safe recycling of spent computers and televisions.

Maine's laws have provided a model that many other states have followed, reducing toxic pollution, increasing recycling of waste products and turning them into new ones.

This session the Legislature is in the process of amending Maine's groundbreaking electronic waste law to include printers, digital picture frames and video game consoles for safe collection and recycling. Used electronic products, which contain toxic chemicals including lead, mercury, and brominated flame retardants, are the fastest growing problem in our waste stream.

Compact fluorescent light bulbs are an important part of our effort to reduce energy costs. Just one CFL can save \$30 to \$100 on reduced energy costs over its lifetime.

But because they contain mercury, the last thing people who buy these bulbs should not throw them in the trash. This bill works to make it easy and convenient to do the right thing and return the bulbs at the end of their useful life, so they don't end up in trash cans, or in the waste stream where the mercury could end up going into incinerators and right out into the air, and our environment.

Background:

An Act to Provide for the Safe Collection and Recycling of Mercury-Containing Light Bulbs (LD 973)

Fluorescent lights work well, save money and are gaining in popularity.

- Fluorescents provide excellent light while using much less energy than incandescent bulbs. They save energy, money (\$30-\$100 per bulb), and help reduce global warming from power plants.

Fluorescent bulbs contain small amounts of mercury and should be properly disposed of.

- Many Mainers don't know that these light bulbs contain toxic mercury and should not be discarded in the trash. Others don't know where to take their used bulbs for safe disposal and recycling.

Maine needs an ongoing program to ensure fluorescent bulbs are safely collected and recycled.

- The state has a pilot program that is due to end shortly, and it only recycles residential bulbs. Last year alone, the program provided rebates to buy 1.2 million bulbs, and incandescents are to be phased out by 2014, so we know that millions of bulbs will need to be recycled.

To solve this problem, Maine has built on the proven track record of our successful computer recycling (e-waste) law.

- Our successful e-waste law has saved Maine people \$4.5 million dollars, kept over 1.5 million pounds of lead - plus significant amounts of mercury, cadmium, and other toxic compounds - out of Maine's air and water, and ensured safe recycling of over 14 million pounds of toxic electronic waste.
- Like our e-waste law, LD 973 puts the bulb recycling program into the private sector, and has producers, not taxpayers, pay for the collection and recycling of these bulbs; producers will have the incentive to manage costs in the most efficient way.

LD 973:

- Creates a producer-financed, shared-responsibility collection and recycling system for residents, and take steps towards the creation of a collection program for Maine businesses.
- Sets a standard to limit the mercury content of all lighting, reducing mercury in lighting across the board, lowering mercury use and potential hazards.
- Improves the state's procurement policy to purchase fluorescent lighting with low mercury content while maximizing energy efficiency & lamp life.

Shared Responsibility works for e-waste. For CFLs, it would mean:

- Consumers safely dispose of their bulbs at qualified collection centers;
- Towns may serve as collection centers and inform residents;
- Retailers may choose to serve as collection centers and inform customers;
- Manufacturers help inform CFL purchasers about recycling, and finance the collection and transport of recycled bulbs from towns and retailers to recyclers that safely recycle the materials into new products;
- The State informs citizens and provides oversight for the recycling program.

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