

EYE ON THE ENVIRONMENT | Unintended consequences from light bulb ban?

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by David Goldstein

Product bans can provide a decisive path to environmental change, but when governments resort to mandates, people resist. One form of resistance is to publicize information about unintended consequences of the ban.

This is the first year the full effects can be felt from a phase out of incandescent bulbs, set into motion when the U.S. Congress adopted, in 2007, the Energy Independence and Security Act. Now all general-purpose bulbs must produce at least 45 lumens per watt, a standard which incandescent bulbs cannot meet.

When the bulb ban first was adopted, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Heritage Foundation, which both describe themselves on their websites as “free-market think tanks,” raised concerns about disposal of compact fluorescent lights (CFLs). Commonwealth Foundation wrote in a 2010 article, still posted on its website, “Families with small children who would rather stay with the traditional, safer light bulb won’t be able to...”, pointing out inconvenient procedures recommended by the U.S. EPA for cleanup of floors after accidental breakage of a fluorescent lamp.

Similarly, Heritage Foundation wrote, in 2007, again in an article still on its website, “Politicians used a distorted view of ‘creative destruction’ mixed with global warming concerns to sell the regulation (banning incandescent bulbs) . . . But the politicians, as they typically do, failed to see the unintended consequences . . . CFLs use high levels of mercury, and exposure to mercury vapor is dangerous if the bulbs are broken.”

Now the ban is fully in place, and the replacement turns out to be not the expected CFLs, but light-emitting diodes, LEDs. Tech guru Clint DeBoer, who, in response to the ban, invoked the Boston Tea Party on his blog-style website, avgadgets.com, and coined the phrase “Light cessation without representation,” acknowledged LEDs are an improvement. LEDs pay for themselves in energy savings during their long life, and “LED lighting really IS better than incandescent. Maybe I just hate things being forced on me prematurely,” he wrote.

We do have to contend, however, with the disposal of fluorescent bulbs. To find drop off sites, go to Earth911.com and search for “CFLs” – leaving off the “s” yields no results. Call sites before going; some listings are outdated.

For example, Batteries Plus in Ventura normally accepts both fluorescent tubes and bulbs but is not accepting new drop offs while they wait for pickup from their full containers, according to Sales Associate Andy Gonzalez. Batteries Plus in Camarillo accepts both fluorescent tubes and bulbs, including from businesses, but charges five dollars per bulb. Home Depot in Thousand Oaks used to accept both CFLs and tubes, but now, like the Home Depot in Oxnard, they accept just CFLs, not tubes.

Stan Wilson of Ventura, emailed me, asking, “How do they keep mercury out of the environment” when recycling fluorescent bulbs? ... Is [recycling CFLs] just another one of those feel good things we do to pretend we are saving the environment?”

In answer, Don Sheppard, a Ventura County Integrated Waste Management Analyst who manages the county’s Pollution Prevention Center, explained to me how collected bulbs are carefully packed into cardboard tubes and collected by Clean Earth, Inc.

The tubes go to another company, which removes the phosphor powder and extracts the mercury at their factory in Indiana, where it is recycled for industrial uses. The remaining powder is recycled by Rare Earth Recovery Sciences, which extracts rare earth metals. Glass from lamps was previously used to make concrete powder or tile, but due to low demand, the glass now goes with plastic from lamps to landfills. Metal recyclers collect the aluminum end caps.

In contrast to fluorescent lights, but like incandescent bulbs, LEDs go to landfills for disposal.

Doug Kobold, executive director of the non-profit California Product Stewardship Council, said, “If manufacturers were held accountable for the end-of-life costs of their products, they may be more inclined to design them to be more durable, reusable, repairable and

recyclable.”

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