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EU to phase out energy-guzzling light bulbs

The European Commission yesterday (18 March) officially adopted two regulations to improve the energy efficiency of house lamps and office, street and industrial lighting products. Meanwhile, industry sources claimed that intelligent lighting systems will ultimately provide greater energy savings.

Background

In October 2008, EU energy ministers invited the European Commission to draft a regulation to phase out the sale of all incandescent and poorly-performing light bulbs by 2010. This is to be done within the framework of the [Eco-design Directive](#), which provides performance requirements for energy-using products.

Actual measures under the directive are decided by the Commission on a product-by-product basis, under the supervision of a designated panel of EU member-state experts as part of the fast-track 'comitology' procedure.

The first 19 energy-using product groups for which the EU executive wants energy-efficiency standards to be established - including heating equipment, lighting, domestic appliances and electric motors - was selected during a transitional phase after the adoption of the directive in July 2005.

In October 2008, the Commission unveiled the next batch of ten, including such product groups as air-conditioning and ventilating systems as well as food preparation and refrigeration equipment, for which energy standards will be established in the next three years ([EurActiv 24/10/08](#)).

So far, implementing measures have been approved for TV set-top boxes, tertiary sector lighting, external power supplies and appliances in standby mode.

The European Parliament gave its green light to a phase-out of incandescent light bulbs on 17 February ([EurActiv 18/02/09](#)).

The measures will gradually phase out all incandescent light bulbs and inefficient halogens by 2012 ([EurActiv 09/12/08](#)). In the meantime, households will be able to choose between compact fluorescent lamps (CFL), which use up to 75% less energy than traditional light bulbs, or efficient halogens, which yield energy savings of between 25% and 50%.

According to the Commission, the two measures adopted under the EU's Eco-design Directive will reduce Europeans' energy bills by €11 billion every year, by saving roughly the electricity consumption of Belgium by 2020. This will reduce CO2 emissions by 32 million tons, the EU executive says.

But it has not all been plain sailing regarding the adoption of the measures, as concerns have been raised that CFLs could have an adverse impact on people suffering from medical conditions such as epilepsy, lupus, migraines and autism. The mercury content of some halogen lamps has also been criticised for replacing one environmental problem with another.

The Commission, however, says a scientific committee looked into the health aspects and found that the new lamps cause no damage to health. The EU executive's energy spokesperson, Ferran Tarradellas Espuny, said concerns over mercury are unfounded, as levels found in the bulbs are "acceptable under EU legislation". In fact, the new regulations would reduce mercury content by lowering the demand for energy from coal-fired power stations, which emit it in the process.

Environmental NGOs, on the other hand, hailed the ban on inefficient bulbs as a long-awaited first step towards improving energy efficiency in Europe ([EurActiv 14/10/08](#)).

Intelligent lighting: A step forward

Some industry representatives, however, argued that the measures are no more than a first step towards efficient lighting in Europe. Representatives from Honeywell, producer of lighting systems, criticised big lamp companies for swamping the EU agenda with their interests.

"This is only one side of the coin," they said. "There are extremely significant savings to be achieved by simply turning lights off when not needed. It won't matter how efficient a lighting system is: if lighting is left on when not required, then it is generating waste," they added.

Honeywell argues that the ultimate energy saving step will be to use sensors on ceilings to activate lights when somebody walks into a room. The sensors then automatically switch them off after the person leaves the room.

This kind of intelligent lighting system can be installed in a number of environments, from offices to factories, but they are still too expensive at present to be considered for residential buildings.

Citing various studies, Honeywell estimates that sensors could lead to 30% energy savings in non-residential buildings, where lighting accounts for around 26% of all electricity consumed. This could save 4.2 billion euro annually, the business says, calling for more attention from the EU to this largely sidelined energy-efficiency aspect.

According to Honeywell, investment in such a lighting system would pay itself back in around a year, making it financially profitable.

Positions:

EU Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs said the "groundbreaking measures" would confirm the EU's commitment to reaching its energy efficiency and climate protection goals. "By replacing last century's lighting products by more performant technologies, European homes, buildings and streets will keep the same quality of lighting, while saving energy, CO2 and money," he argued.

German MEP Peter Liese (EPP-ED) said: "The high energy consumption in all EU member states causes drastic problems that citizens with climate-friendly lifestyles also have to shoulder. Climate change can only be stopped if we make great progress in energy efficiency."

British MEP John Bowis (Conservatives) said: "Energy-saving light bulbs are clearly good for the environment and we welcome the Commission's move to reduce the use of incandescent bulbs. However, the Commission and the British Government must be careful not to cause pain and disability in the process."