

Energy-saving bulbs light up recycling puzzle

By Tina Irgang, USA TODAY

More states are moving to establish safe recycling programs and address the mercury content of the popular curly, compact fluorescent light bulbs.

The bulbs, known as CFLs, generally use less power than incandescent light bulbs. CFLs use trace amounts of the toxic metal mercury to produce light, says Mark Kohorst, senior manager for environmental health and safety at the National Electrical Manufacturers Association. If a bulb breaks, he says, there is a "minimal" risk from exposure to mercury, which can damage the lungs and central nervous system if inhaled.

In May, Maine became the first state to pass a law requiring manufacturers to limit mercury levels in the bulbs and pay for recycling them safely.

Elsewhere:

- The Illinois Legislature passed a law in May that requires recycling information on CFL labels.
- In Nevada, a special committee is working on regulations that would require utilities to inform consumers on how to recycle CFLs.
- A committee in the Massachusetts Legislature is debating a law that would require manufacturers to provide consumers convenient drop-off locations for spent bulbs and labels that educate consumers about recycling, says Democratic state Rep. William Straus.
- In California, a bill regarding CFL recycling has passed the State Assembly and awaits Senate approval.

CFLs' mercury content has been reduced by nearly 80% since they were introduced in the 1980s, Kohorst says.

General Electric, a major manufacturer of the bulbs, advocates federal legislation, spokeswoman Kim Freeman says. "We do not believe a patchwork or state-by-state approach will work," she says.

EnergyStar, a federal program on energy efficiency, says CFLs use up to 75% less energy than traditional bulbs. CFLs' market share has increased from about 5% to just over 20% in the past five years, EnergyStar reports.

Environmental Protection Agency spokeswoman Latisha Petteway says the EPA "strongly encourages" proper recycling of CFLs because it "prevents the release of mercury into the environment."

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