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Lights Out on Traditional Bulbs

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In 2007, the United States Congress passed the Energy Independence and Security Act, which was designed to promote energy independence, renewable fuels and energy efficiency technologies. One of the provisions in the Act was the implementation of increased energy efficiency standards for incandescent light bulbs. Beginning in January 2012, 100-watt incandescent bulbs must be 30% more energy efficient than the current incandescent bulbs on the market. 75-watt bulbs must meet the heightened energy efficiency standards by 2013 and 40- and 60-watt bulbs must meet the new standards by 2014. While incandescent-style bulbs will remain legal to manufacture, the heightened energy standards effectively ban the traditional light bulb as we know it. Traditional light bulbs will continue to be sold in stores until existing inventory is exhausted, but the manufacture of such bulbs must cease on January 1, 2012. Some companies have already closed manufacturing plants and commenced selling off their existing stock.

What does this mean for consumers? First, it means consumers will have to consider new options for lighting. Halogen, LED and CFL (compact fluorescent) or “squiggle-bulb” lights meet the new energy efficiency standards, so consumers will be screwing a new light into lamp sockets going forward. If you cannot live without the traditional light bulb, you had better start stocking up now!

Second, the conversion to CFL or other lighting technologies will result in higher up-front

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costs for consumers, but ultimately lower lighting costs in the long-term. CFL lights use approximately 75% less energy than the traditional incandescent bulb because the latter loses 90% of its energy through heat. Additionally, CFL bulbs last up to ten times longer than a traditional incandescent bulb, thus reducing the costs associated with the frequent replacement of incandescent bulbs. It is estimated that the technology change will result in savings between \$25 billion and \$60 billion in energy costs.

Third, consumers must learn the changes in terminology associated with the brightness of lights. Traditionally, light bulbs have been characterized by wattage, which corresponds to the energy used and the brightness of the light. If you wanted a bright light for your garage you would buy a 100-watt bulb, but if you wanted a lower light for bedroom reading you likely would buy a 60-watt bulb. With the phase-out of incandescent bulbs, that terminology will change. Lighting will now be rated in “lumens,” which is the measure of the power of light as perceived by the human eye. A 100-watt incandescent bulb typically is rated at 1,600 lumens while a 60-watt bulb is rated at 800 lumens. New package labeling standards from the Federal Trade Commission will be implemented by manufacturers in mid-2011 to show the lumens and energy used by light bulbs. The new package labels will look similar to the nutritional information found on the side of food products and allow consumers to select the most efficient bulb that meets their lighting needs.

Finally, consumers should be aware that CFL lights contain small amounts of mercury vapor inside the glass tubing. Mercury is poisonous and direct contact with mercury can lead to serious or fatal health issues. Consumers should exercise caution when handling and disposing CFLs to avoid breakage and release of the mercury vapor. While it is illegal in some states to dispose of CFLs in household trash, recycling programs are still being developed and are not yet widely available to consumers.

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These new energy efficiency standards are the first of several phases designed to make lighting more efficient. Beginning in 2020, light bulbs must be roughly 200% more efficient, so expect more changes in your lighting choices over the coming decade.



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