

Home Depot Offers Recycling for Compact Fluorescent Bulbs

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Some big retailers are promoting compact fluorescent light bulbs as a way to save energy. But improper disposal of the bulbs creates a hazard, because they contain small amounts of mercury.



Alan Zale for The *New York Times*

Paul Fariselli hung a sign Monday at the Home Depot in New Rochelle, N.Y., to promote the recycling program. All United States Home Depots will take part.



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Aldo DeRubeis bought compact fluorescent bulbs on Monday at the Home Depot in New Rochelle, N.Y. Sales of compact fluorescents climbed to 75 million last year for the retailer.

Recycling them is about to get easier. Home Depot, the nation's second-largest retailer, will announce on Tuesday that it will take back old compact fluorescents in all 1,973 of its stores in the United States, creating the nation's most widespread recycling program for the bulbs.

"We kept hearing from the community that there was a little bit of concern about mercury in the C.F.L.'s," said Ron Jarvis, Home Depot's senior vice president for environmental innovation, using the industry abbreviation for the bulbs. "And if the C.F.L.'s were in their house, how could they dispose of them?"

Until now, consumers had to seek out local hazardous waste programs or smaller retail chains willing to collect the bulbs for recycling, like Ikea and True Value. Some consumers have waited for retailers like Wal-Mart to have a designated recycling day. Others bought kits to mail the bulbs to a recycling facility.

The Environmental Protection Agency has been looking into putting bulb drop-off boxes at post offices, said Jim Berlow, director of the agency's hazardous waste minimization and management division.

But those plans are not final, and across most of the country, recycling the bulbs has been inconvenient at best. Industry professionals estimate that the recycling rate is around 2 percent.

Home Depot's program, which will accept any maker's bulbs, will bring relatively convenient recycling within reach of most households. Mr. Jarvis estimated that 75 percent of the nation's homes are within 10 miles of a Home Depot.

"We're trying to do the right thing," he said. "Some of the things that we do are for the community and not for the bottom line."

Both Home Depot and Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, have vigorously promoted the bulbs as part of their commitment to the environment. Wal-Mart announced in October 2006 that it wanted to sell 100 million compact fluorescents by the end of 2007. It surpassed that goal, selling 193 million bulbs to date.

Wal-Mart has accepted expired bulbs at take-back events in particular markets and is exploring how to do it consistently on a national level. Wal-Mart has more than twice the number of United States stores as Home Depot.

The need for a national recycling program became apparent to Home Depot as sales of compact fluorescents, which had been slow compared with sales of incandescent bulb, climbed to 75 million last year, from about 50 million in 2006. And a recycling program is likely to drive even more people to Home Depot.

"We haven't really had to develop the infrastructure" before now, said Steven Hamburg, interim director of the Center for Environmental Studies at Brown University. "The demand wasn't there." But lately, consumers have been getting the message — in stores, from the media and through awareness campaigns — that compact fluorescents use up to 75 percent less energy, last longer and cost less over time than incandescent bulbs.

Mr. Hamburg says the average household reduces its energy budget by \$12 to \$20 a month using compact fluorescents. Additionally, better technology has made the bulbs' harsh glow somewhat warmer and softer, though many people still object to it.

More innovations are on the way. Home Depot has plans to introduce more dimmable compact fluorescents within the year. Mr. Hamburg and colleagues at Brown recently developed a box that absorbs mercury — so there would be no need to fret if a bulb breaks in the box.

Mercury is found in other common household items like electronics, appliances and pesticides. Its vapors, however, can harm people and pollute the environment, which is why recycling is encouraged. (In some places it is against the law not to recycle the bulbs.)

"We generally think using these bulbs are over all a good thing for the environment," said Mr. Berlow of the E.P.A. "The only thing you have to be aware of is the potential for them to break."

The E.P.A. devotes pages of its Web site to cleanup instructions for broken compact fluorescents. Before even beginning to clean up a spill, consumers are advised to leave the room (along with their pets), open a window and shut off any operating air heating or cooling systems.

That may seem foreboding, but experts see a greater health risk from the mercury emissions produced by coal-burning plants to power less efficient bulbs.

"The avoided mercury emissions are much larger than the mercury we're using in the bulbs," said Mr. Hamburg of Brown, referring to compact fluorescents.

Home Depot's bulbs contain 2.3 to 3.5 milligrams of mercury, which is below the National Electrical Manufacturers Association recommendation of 5 milligrams or fewer. It is a small amount, equivalent to the volume of the steel ball in the tip of a ballpoint pen. "Most people in their home have 1,000 times more mercury literally in their thermostat, let alone thermometers," Mr. Hamburg said.