



Product Policy Institute

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BACKGROUND:

Next Steps for Toxic Mercury Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs: Manufacturer Responsibility for Collection, Disposal a Must

Overview: Three local government product stewardship organizations from the U.S. and Canada have outlined the next vital steps in the use of toxic mercury-containing compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs). These groups are available for comment and expert testimony on this subject. The groups say the next step is for manufacturers to create and finance convenient, environmentally safe recycling systems for CFLs.

Subject Matter Experts:

California Product Stewardship Council
Northwest Product Stewardship Council
British Columbia Product Stewardship Council
The Product Policy Institute

The product stewardship councils are coalitions of primarily local governments working together to promote product stewardship, the concept that whoever designs, produces, sells, or uses a product takes responsibility for minimizing the product's environmental impact throughout all stages of the products' life cycle. The Product Policy Institute is a North American non-profit organization that researches and promotes policies that reduce public costs and promote environmental sustainability.

Issue: There is widespread agreement that energy inefficient incandescent lights contribute to global warming, as governments from Australia to Canada and Europe have moved to phase them out. There's also increasing recognition that the lighting technology most widely available to replace incandescent lights in homes – compact fluorescent lamps – are toxic and should be recycled. Each bulb contains a small amount of the potent neurotoxin mercury. When multiplied by tens or hundreds of millions of bulbs, these small amounts add up to a large environmental problem. And CFLs are but the tip of a larger issue of fluorescent lighting, already widely used in commercial and institutional establishments. Considering all fluorescent lights in the United States, 70 percent are disposed in the trash, resulting in 8.2 metric tons of mercury improperly disposed in 2005.

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The issue now is: How to recycle all those toxic bulbs? As municipal budgets tighten, local governments cannot continue to collect and/or manage the recycling and/or disposal of CFLs and other mercury-containing lights by themselves. Only two percent of spent CFLs from households are currently collected for recycling, mostly at local government household hazardous waste (HHW) facilities. That means that 98 percent are disposed in the trash where virtually all are broken en route to landfills and incinerators, according to the US EPA. In California, fewer than 10 percent of the state's residents use HHW facilities even once per year. Recycling spent bulbs needs to be as convenient and easy as buying the bulbs in the first place.

Solution: The solution is to require that manufacturers take responsibility for minimizing the environmental impact of fluorescent lights from design to disposal. The goal is to ensure effective recycling of toxic lighting products while rewarding innovations that result in products that are both energy efficient *and* free of toxics like mercury. The way to achieve this result is to include the cost of disposal in the purchase price of the product, and motivate manufacturers who design the product to use their ingenuity and marketing experience to design effective reverse distribution systems for their products. Manufacturers may contract with retailers, recyclers and local governments to collect their products, but manufacturer system design and financing ensures the most efficient collection systems.

Action/status: The groups jointly issued a statement calling for manufacturers to take financial responsibility and provide collection programs for fluorescent lights, since the toxins they contain are banned from disposal in many states.

Current Legislation: The groups also applauded pending California legislation that would increase the development and use of energy efficient lighting, reduce the toxicity of the bulbs, and require manufacturers to provide take-back recycling services. The bill, AB 1109, requires manufacturers to have a system in place for collecting and recycling end-of-life bulbs that contain hazardous materials, such as lead and mercury. Manufacturers would be required to submit a plan to the State on how they will provide an environmentally responsible disposal and take-back program throughout California by July 1, 2009. The measure is sponsored by California Assembly Member Jared Huffman, chair of the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials. The groups called the legislation a model for all states, and the next step in environmental protections.

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For additional details regarding mercury-containing compact fluorescent lights, visit http://caproductstewardship.org/products/fluoro_p.htm or <http://www.govlink.org/hazwaste/mercury/LampsWithHg.html>