

75-watt lightbulb about to be permanently switched off

By Caroline Winter, Bloomberg Businessweek

The phaseout of traditional 100-watt incandescent lightbulbs in January – a move to meet new federal efficiency standards – struck panic in the hearts of some consumers.

Home Depot reported a nearly 20 percent spike in sales of 100-watt bulbs for 2011 as people rushed to stockpile. At least one Ohio woman made sure to squirrel away enough bulbs to last 50 years.

A month from now, on Jan. 1, 2013, traditional incandescent 75-watt bulbs also will go the way of the dodo, as the second stage of the federal lightbulb phaseout goes into effect. This time around, however, shoppers seem more relaxed.

“Last year we saw some consumers buying up product, but that’s really slowed down,” says Bill Hamilton, president of lightbulb merchandising at Home Depot. “Customers are beginning to embrace the new technology.”

Hamilton says the initial rush to hoard traditional incandescent bulbs may have resulted from a reluctance to learn about alternatives.

“We’ve done some focus groups and customers have basically told us, ‘I haven’t had to think about lightbulbs or lighting for the last 100 years – don’t make me learn about it now,’ ” he says.

These days, customers have gotten over the hump and discovered numerous alternatives, including LEDs, compact fluorescents, and even incandescent bulbs that meet the federal requirement of being at least 25 percent more efficient.

It also doesn't hurt that the retail price of energy-efficient bulbs has dropped by more than half over the past year, as companies perfected their technology and rolled out mass production, says Hamilton.

Not everyone has embraced the government's energy-efficiency standards, which passed in 2007. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., who once declared, "I think Thomas Edison did a pretty patriotic thing for this country by inventing the lightbulb," has sponsored the Light-Bulb Freedom of Choice Act to repeal the phaseout of incandescent bulbs. And in July, House Republicans adopted a measure to halt the lightbulb-efficiency law.

"People are sick of the government treading where it just doesn't belong," said Rep. Michael Burgess, a Texas Republican who sponsored the lightbulb amendment that was added to a broader energy-spending bill.

The House measure is, in fact, an extension of a rider placed on the lightbulb law in December 2011, prohibiting the U.S. Department of Energy from using any funds to enforce the federal lightbulb law.

This means that, although such lighting manufacturers as General Electric and Royal Philips Electronics stopped making traditional 100-watt bulbs, there's no guarantee that other companies would do the same. (The efficiency standards prohibit only the manufacturing and distribution of the lightbulbs, not their sale.)

"Some in Congress are willing to put U.S. jobs at risk for political positioning," said Joseph Higbee, a spokesman for the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA). "This is an example of a few politicizing lightbulbs at the risk of American workers and the economy."

Higbee says manufacturers are, in fact, supporting the efficiency legislation, which NEMA estimates could mean \$10

billion to \$15 billion worth of national energy savings per year. Companies such as GE and Philips, he says, have invested millions of dollars in developing alternative products, and they resent being left in limbo because of political infighting in Washington.

Higbee expects the rider preventing enforcement of lightbulb-efficiency laws will be dropped in 2013, and that the phaseout will continue into 2014, when the traditional 60-watt and 40-watt bulbs are scheduled to be discontinued.

The biggest shift for customers, meanwhile, will be learning the new lightbulb lingo. Instead of thinking in “watts,” which measure the amount of power going into a bulb, they henceforth must think in “lumens,” which measure the amount of light produced.

Explains Higbee: “A more efficient bulb will require fewer watts to produce the same amount of lumens as a less-efficient bulb.”

If this doesn't make sense, don't worry. Home Depot has spent plenty of time and money over the past year training employees to help customers find what they need.

“Articulating what's best – what the advantages are in terms of energy, light output, quality and color – that's really our biggest weapon,” says Hamilton.

For those who just don't want to give up their trusty Edison bulbs, there's always eBay. Hurry, while supplies last.