

The new bulb: Energy bill phases out light in favor of greener devices

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ASHEVILLE — Thomas Edison's incandescent light bulb, which has lit up America for almost 130 years, will soon go the way of whale oil.

A little-noticed provision of the federal energy bill, signed into law by President Bush just before Christmas, phases out the bulb over the next four to 12 years in favor of a new generation of energy-efficient lights.

That means consumers will be facing new choices in the light bulb aisle of their favorite stores.

The new devices include current products like compact fluorescents and halogens as well as emerging products such as light emitting diodes and more efficient incandescent bulbs. They cost consumers more initially but return their investment in the form of energy savings.

Robert Sipes, vice president of the western region for Progress Energy Carolinas, said that as CFLs (compact fluorescent lights) become more common, they "will reduce the amount of power we have to make, and in turn reduce the amount of fossil fuels we have to burn."

Progress Energy subsidized the sale of some 200,000 CFL bulbs through The Home Depot. That promotion has been completed, Sipes said, but the utility will roll out more programs in 2008.

In Asheville, other groups have been promoting energy-saving light bulbs. Appalachian Offsets lets people calculate their carbon footprint — the amount of greenhouse gases they contribute by heating their houses, driving their cars, watching their TVs and using their appliances — and then donate money, which is used for projects that save energy around Asheville.

In September, UNC Asheville students swapped out 5,000 light bulbs for the Asheville Housing Authority in partnership with Appalachian Offsets. The goal is to replace 13,000 incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents in the Asheville Housing Authority's low-income rental housing.

"Appalachian Offsets has started with CFL replacements because the carbon offset per dollar is so great," said Matt Siegel, director of the WNC Green Building Council, which administers the Appalachian Offsets program. "Hopefully with a widespread transition to CFLs, the program can begin to focus on other projects such as solar hot water or affordable housing."

Under the measure signed into law by President Bush, all light bulbs must use 25-30 percent less energy than today's products by 2012 to 2014. The phase-in will start with 100-watt bulbs in January 2012 and end with 40-watt bulbs in January 2014. By 2020, bulbs must be 70 percent more efficient.

Compact fluorescent bulbs already meet the 70 percent efficiency standard. The bulbs cost roughly \$2 versus about 50 cents for an incandescent but last six times longer.

It also saves about \$5 a year in electricity costs, paying for itself in as little as four months, says the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy.

Other bulbs are emerging. The Home Depot has started selling a \$5 Philips halogen that's 30 percent more efficient than incandescents. And General Electric says it will develop more energy-efficient incandescents by 2010. Also in the pipeline: light-emitting diodes that cost much more but last about 12 years.

"LED lights are becoming more affordable, and they are even more efficient than CFLs without the negative impacts of mercury when you dispose of them," Sipes said.

The new federal rules will save consumers' \$40 billion in energy and other costs from 2012 to 2030, ACEEE says.

"This is one of the most significant policies ... in terms of reducing electric demand and addressing global warming," says Lowell Ungar of the Alliance to Save Energy.

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