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EcoConsumer

Now you're out of excuses - time to switch to CFL bulbs

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Who would have thought a mere lightbulb would become such a media darling?

The compact fluorescent lamp, or CFL, has reached eco-friendly superstardom. It's touted everywhere you look as one of the best and easiest ways for consumers to help the planet. But can this little bulb with the distinctive swirly shape really make such a big difference in reducing global warming? Absolutely. According to the U.S. Energy Star program, if every American home replaced just one standard incandescent light bulb with a long-lasting CFL, we would prevent greenhouse gases equal to the emissions of 800,000 cars.

But that's a big "if." Many folks have not embraced CFLs. It shouldn't be the price — you can now easily find CFLs for less than \$2 a bulb, especially if you buy them in multiple packs, or take advantage of rebates. And the savings in energy costs from that one purchase may surpass \$40 over the life of the bulb.

So what's not to like? Let's look at three major reasons people have not yet chosen to light up their lives with compact fluorescents:

1. "I don't like the light from CFLs."

These bulbs still have a reputation of giving off that eerie blue or green fluorescent light that makes you look half-dead. Manufacturers now offer "soft white" or "warm white" CFLs. These provide light similar to that of incandescent bulbs.



JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

Compact fluorescent bulbs have a reputation of giving off eerie blue or green fluorescent light. But manufacturers now offer bulbs that provide light similar to that of incandescent bulbs.

To find exactly the right color light for a specific situation, check the bulb's Kelvin (K) scale number, which indicates light color. For warm white or yellowish-white light, pick CFLs at 2,650-3,200K. For neutral, try 3,200 to 4,000. For the "coolest" or most bluish-white light, select bulbs above 4,000K. The K number may not appear on the bulb's packaging but can often be found on manufacturer or retailer Web sites.

CFL resources

Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County:

206-296-4692 or www.govlink.org/hazwaste/mercury/lampsResidentialRecycle.html

Take It Back Network: www.metrokc.gov/dnrrp/swd/takeitback

Puget Sound Energy (rebates): www.pse.com/solutions/rebatesOnLighting.aspx

Seattle City Light: www.seattle.gov/light/conserves/resident/cv5_lw2.htm

Energy Star: www.energystar.gov

Environmental Defense: www.environmentaldefense.org/go/maketheswitch

Environmental Defense offers a handy online guide, "Find the Right Bulb," at www.environmentaldefense.org/go/maketheswitch. Click on your specific needs, including the location, shape and special features, and it will generate a list of CFL brands and models that will work for you.

2. "I tried CFLs, and they did not last as long as I was led to believe."

This also occurred more in the past than today. If you follow guidelines for correct usage, you should have few problems. For example, never use a CFL with a dimmer unless the bulb packaging says "dim-mable." Don't install a CFL where you turn the light on and off more than 20 times a day. Avoid putting them in enclosed, recessed fixtures.

Stay away from the cheapest, off-brand bulbs. Look for Energy Star-certified CFLs, which have a two-year minimum warranty and other positive attributes.

Several manufacturers, including Philips and Osram Sylvania, even offer a seven-year warranty on some CFLs. Always save receipts, and if your bulb fails before its time, notify the retailer or manufacturer and request a refund.

3. "It's a hassle to dispose of CFLs, since they contain mercury."

CFLs contain a small amount of mercury and do not pose a safety risk in the home. But because the mercury would add up if all these bulbs went into a landfill, fluorescent bulbs must be kept out of the garbage and recycled. It's the law in King, Snohomish and Kitsap counties.

But doing the right thing with your old CFLs really should not inconvenience you. Keep in mind they won't burn out very often. And more retailers now accept them for recycling.

Seattle Lighting has led the way. Its six locations in the Puget Sound area accept spent fluorescent bulbs at a charge of 50 cents each.

For a list of those sites and other King County businesses that take CFLs and fluorescent tubes for recycling, for a small fee, see www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/takeitback.

You can also recycle CFLs at no charge at several locations: The Ikea store in Renton; collection facilities in North Seattle, South Seattle and Bellevue operated by the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County; and Wastemobile collection events, operated by the same program.

Get on board

The ubiquitous, energy-bleeding incandescent bulb was innovative when Thomas Edison developed it, but its inefficiency has put it on the endangered list. Efforts to ban incandescent bulbs have already sprung up in England and California.

If you want to save money and help flip the switch on global warming, it's time to jump on the CFL bandwagon.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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