

Safe and Convenient Recycling for Lights Containing Mercury

The Problem: Using energy efficient lighting is an important step in conserving energy and reducing greenhouse gases. However, safe recycling of mercury-containing lights is needed to prevent harm to people and our environment.

Lights containing mercury, including compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs), save energy and are safe to use but the mercury must be properly recycled at the end of life. CFLs use 75% less energy than incandescent lamps, last up to 10 times longer, cost less to use and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But household recycling rates are very low – only about 2%, which means these lights are going into the garbage and releasing mercury into our air, water, and soil.

Mercury harms the brain, liver and kidneys and causes developmental disorders in children. It persists in the environment and bioaccumulates in the food web. Mercury from a variety of sources has polluted Washington's water bodies resulting in fish advisories warning pregnant women and young children not to eat certain fish.

Many consumers are choosing CFLs and, with pending federal energy efficiency requirements, traditional incandescent bulbs may be off the market starting in 2012. As sales of CFLs increase, concerns about end-of-life issues are also growing. Lights containing mercury need to be properly recycled. Almost 53% of Washington residents live in areas that ban the disposal of mercury-containing lights in the garbage (Snohomish, Kitsap and King Counties and the City of Seattle).

Washington citizens and small businesses are demanding a convenient, safe way to recycle mercury-containing lights.



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The Solution: A safe and convenient product stewardship program for recycling lights containing mercury.

Washington State needs legislation to create a recycling program funded by product manufacturers that is convenient and safe for residents, small businesses and small school districts. Lighting producers would be required to establish a collection and recycling system that prevents mercury releases into the environment and protects human health.

The bill uses a shared responsibility approach:

Lighting producers would be required to take back their products, but the bill allows them the flexibility to design the best program based on their resources and knowledge of the product. Manufacturers may create a program collectively or on their own. Lighting producers will establish and pay for a system to collect, transport and recycle their products without charge when residents or small businesses return lights containing mercury.

Retailers, local governments, non-profit groups, haulers and others can volunteer to provide collection sites or services for the program and receive compensation from the lighting producers. Producers might also choose to provide mail-back or ship-back services.

Experience with take-back programs in Washington state and other places suggests that retailers will want to offer this valuable service to their customers because the program provides a needed service customers have been asking for, increases foot traffic and generates revenues. Producers will promote the program and provide materials to retailers, local governments, public utilities and others to help promote the program to customers and the public.

Washington's Department of Ecology will review, approve and monitor the take-back program. Agency staffing for the program will be minimal, but will provide essential oversight.

Supporters of the Recycling Act for Mercury-Containing Lights include:

Washington Citizens for Resource Conservation
King County | Snohomish County | Northwest Energy Coalition
Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County
Washington State Recycling Association