

EEB- RPN-MPP blog: In global first, NGOs urge Europe-wide ban on CFLs by 2018

Environmental NGOsⁱ are urging the European Commission (EC) to restrict sales of compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), showing how they can be feasibly replaced with lighting emitting diode (LED) lamps, which are safer and more energy efficient.

The Commission's environment directorate has, in many cases, the power to restrict electronic equipment that contains mercury (or other persistent toxic chemicals) from the market under the EU Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) Directive.ⁱⁱ

"LEDs are already available, mercury-free, and have surpassed CFLs with respect to energy efficiency, lamp life and performance," said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, Zero Mercury Project Manager for the European Environmental Bureau (EEB). "The time is ripe for an EC decision to take commonly used CFLs (<30W) off the shelves throughout the EU by September 2018," Lymberidi-Settimo added. "This will boost innovation and create jobs."

The NGO comments are in response to the EU lighting industry's request to the European Commission to continue approving RoHS mercury exemptions for most categories of fluorescent and high-intensity discharge (HID) lighting equipment, including CFLs. This could result in these mercury-containing products continuing to be sold for as long as the law allows.

"Our research clearly shows that LEDs are environmentally preferable to CFLs from a lifecycle perspective," said Alicia Culver, executive director of the Responsible Purchasing Network. "LEDs use less energy, last three times longer, and are less toxic than CFLs. Also, because the price of LEDs has been dropping rapidly, while their performance has been dramatically improving, LED lamps are now a practical and affordable alternative to mercury-containing CFLs for most general purpose lighting applications."

The groups point out that their case is bolstered by research from the European Commission and its consultants predicting that the availability, performance and price of LED lamps will continue to quickly improve.

"LEDs are rapidly becoming more cost competitive, especially when their ability to cut energy use, nearly eliminated replacement needs and when waste disposal costs are factored in," said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. "Besides, shifting to LED technology moves us away from fossil fuel dependency, since nearly one-fifth of global electricity use is in lighting."

Workers can be exposed to mercury when manufacturing, transporting, installing, recycling or disposing of mercury-added lamps, while consumers can be exposed when fluorescent lamps are broken - the greatest risk is indoors where there is no ventilation to remove mercury vapours immediately after breakage.

According to Lighting Europe's exemption request, less than half of the CFLs sold in the EU (45%) are collected and recycled. NGOs are concerned that the longer CFLs are allowed on the market, the more they will create a mercury waste problem since they will be entering the waste stream (in volume) for many years after the ban.

For other lamp categories (such as fluorescent tubes and High Intensity Discharge -HID- lamps), NGOs want lower mercury limits to be imposed when the current RoHS Directive expires – or shortly thereafter (within the next 2 years). Research shows that many lamps in those categories are already meeting the proposed lower mercury limits as manufacturers are increasingly using more accurate mercury dosing methods.

“Our research, which is based on data provided by major European lamp manufacturers, shows that many types of fluorescent and HID lamps can operate with much lower mercury levels and still have high energy efficiency and a very long lamp life,” said Culver.

The deadline for comments on the mercury exemption requests for lighting equipment was 16 October 2015. The Commission is expected to make a decision by the end of 2016.

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ⁱ Environmental NGOs include:

-- The European Environmental Bureau, (EEB), www.eeb.org, is a federation of more than 140 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU Member States and most Accession Countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

--The Mercury Policy Project (MPP), a project of the Tides Center, www.mercurypolicy.org, works to promote policies to eliminate mercury uses, prevent the export and trafficking of mercury, and significantly reduce mercury exposures at the local, national, and international levels. We strive to work harmoniously with other groups and individuals who have similar goals and interests.

--The Responsible Purchasing Network, www.responsiblepurchasing.org, is a non-profit organization based in the United States that helps government agencies, institutions and businesses to specify, evaluate and purchase environmentally preferable goods and services including high-efficiency, low-toxicity lighting equipment.

ⁱⁱ See restriction of the use of certain hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment; see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/rohs_eee/legis_en.htm.