

Switching to fluorescents is doing the right thing

Our house is full of fluorescent lights and we are delighted.

It often seems these days that it is impossible for Congress to pass clear and sensible legislation, but when both houses of Congress overwhelmingly passed, and President George Bush signed, the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, they did the right thing.

We first started using fluorescents in our house in Northern New York in 1996. When we left in 2001, the fluorescent bulb in our outdoor lamppost was still working despite the challenges of extremely cold weather.

The compact fluorescent light (CFL) set to go off every night in our living room is still working after 15 years.

Since we moved to Florida in 2001, we turn on our torchiere lamp almost every evening. It has a whopping 58 watts – a 250-watt equivalent of incandescent bulbs – reflecting off the ceiling to light the entire room well enough for us both to read.

Although 34 fluorescents were not the only factor in our energy savings, when Florida Power and Light did an energy audit of our house, they said we already used 50 percent less electricity than the average house of our size and appliances.

Now that the 2007 law is about to go into effect, the ignorant, the idiotic and the ideological are coming out of the woodwork to object. While there once were what I would call legitimate concerns, most of those have gone away over the past several years and those remaining pale in the face of alternatives.

Representative Joe Barton -- the same Texas oil representative who thought the U.S. government should apologize for the bad things it said about BP's role in last year's Gulf oil disaster -- doesn't think the government should "dictate" how Americans light their homes. He sponsored a bill to repeal the new guidelines. Massive reductions in oil consumption aren't Joe's thing!

In fact, the legislation doesn't prescribe what kind of lighting we can use; it only limits the amount of energy per unit of light. More efficient incandescent lights could continue to exist.

More serious objections from the past include a delay in reaching full brightness, flickering, bulb styles, cost, length and the "aura" or color. While short delays used to exist, today's delay, where noticeable at all, is less than the time to get from a light switch to your chair.

In our experience, the flickering is gone, and manufacturers now offer a variety of auras you can see laid out at Home Depot. While we rather like the "pigtail" style which shortens bulbs so they won't stick out above lamps, you can buy fluorescents with covers, even flood lamps like we have in our kitchen.

Fluorescents do cost more money but last so much longer that the savings in energy use far outweigh the greater original cost -- now down under \$2 for a 60-watt equivalent. I recommend 60-watt equivalent lights be at least 13 watts.

Although our experience in New York belies it, fluorescents are not made for extremely cold weather and even a short delay may not be best for stairs to an unheated basement.

There is a tiny amount of mercury used to make fluorescents but coal-fired power plants, which produce most of the electricity in this country, spew far more. Even if every fluorescent were dumped in a landfill, switching over to fluorescents would still mean far less mercury in the environment for the same amount of light.

If your CFL breaks, vent and leave the room for 20 minutes before carefully cleaning it up. Kudos to Home Depot for recycling all fluorescents but Eastern Oregon needs to get on board with curbside household recycling, the only recycling that works for household waste.

You don't have to replace all your incandescents to make a difference. Start with the most used locations and save the old incandescents for less used places.

In the end, replacing incandescent lights with more energy efficient alternatives is worth it not only for your household budget but also for the barrels of oil and multiple pollutants spared your country and your world.

This time, Congress and both parties really did the right thing.