

Getting Around the EU Ban

Germans Hoarding Traditional Light Bulbs

The staggered phase out of energy-wasting light bulbs begins on Sept. 1 in Germany. The unpopularity of the energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs that will replace them is leading consumers and retailers to start hoarding the traditional bulbs.

As the Sept. 1 deadline for the implementation of the first phase of the EU's ban on incandescent light bulbs approaches, shoppers, retailers and even museums are hoarding the precious wares -- and helping the manufacturers make a bundle.



DPA

Germans are hoarding traditional incandescent light bulbs as their planned phase out -- in favor of energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs -- approaches.

The EU ban, adopted in March, calls for the gradual replacement of traditional light bulbs with supposedly more energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs (CFL). The first to go, on Sept. 1, will be 100-watt bulbs. Bulbs of other wattages will then gradually fall under the ban, which is expected to cover all such bulbs by Sept. 1, 2012 (see graphic below).

Hardware stores and home-improvement chains in Germany are seeing massive increases in the sales of the traditional bulbs. Obi reports a 27 percent growth in sales over the same period a year ago. Hornbach has seen its frosted-glass light bulb sales increase by 40-112 percent. When it comes to 100-watt bulbs, Max Bahr has seen an 80 percent jump in sales, while the figure has been 150 percent for its competitor Praktiker.

"It's unbelievable what is happening," says Werner Wiesner, the head of Megaman, a manufacturer of energy-saving bulbs. Wiesner recounts a story of how one of his field representatives recently saw a man in a hardware store with a shopping cart full of light bulbs of all types worth more than €200 (\$285). "That's enough for the next 20 years."

And hoarding doesn't seem to be just a customer phenomenon. The EU law only forbids producing and importing incandescent bulbs but does not outlaw their sale. "We've stocked up well," a spokesman for Praktiker told SPIEGEL.

And what's ironic -- in the short term, at least -- is that the companies that manufacture the climate-killing bulbs are seeing a big boost in sales. According to the GfK market research company, sales in Germany of incandescent light bulbs between January and April 20, 2009, saw a 20 percent jump over the same period a year earlier, while CFL sales shrank by 2 percent.

'Light Bulb Socialism'

The EU's ban was originally meant to help it reach its targets on energy efficiency and climate protection. Though much cheaper to buy, incandescent bulbs have long been seen as wasteful because only 5 percent of the energy they consume goes to light production, with the rest just becoming heat.

And consumers were also supposed to feel a positive effect in their pocketbooks as well. European Energy Commission Andris Piebalgs has estimated that the average European household will save €50 per year on electricity bills and that annual CO2 emissions in Europe will be cut by 15 millions tons.



DER SPIEGEL

Schedule for the implementation of the EU ban on fluorescent light bulbs.

But -- like [laws on bent cucumbers](#) -- many have mocked the light bulb legislation as just another example of an EU bureaucracy gone wild. Holger Kraemer, for example, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from Germany's business-friendly FDP party has accused the EU of imposing 'light bulb socialism.'

In fact, in creating this legislation, the EU failed to address consumer preferences and the reservations of a number of other groups. For example, many have complained that the light emitted by a CFL bulb is colder and weaker and that its high-frequency flickering can cause headaches. Then there are complaints about the mercury the CFL bulbs contain, how there is no system for disposing of them in a convenient and environmentally friendly way, and how they allegedly result in exposure to radiation levels higher than allowed under international guidelines.

For some, the issue is also one of broken promises. For example, manufacturers of CFL bulbs justify their higher prices by claiming that they last much longer than traditional bulbs. But a recent test by the environmentally-oriented consumer-protection magazine *Öko Test* found that 16 of the 32 bulb types tested gave up the ghost after 6,000 hours of use -- or much earlier than their manufacturers had promised.

And then, of course, there's the issue of the light the bulbs emit. Many complain that the lights are just not bright enough and that they falsify colors. The Hamburger Kunsthalle, for example, recently made a bulk order for 600 incandescent light bulbs to make sure that it can keep illuminating the works it displays in the time-honored way.

The aesthetic issue is a powerful one. For Munich-based lighting designer Ingo Maurer, the CFL bulbs are ushering in a decrease in the quality of life. "We recommend protests against the ban, civil disobedience and the timely hoarding of lighting implements," Maurer told SPIEGEL. He also adds that he believes the ban might drive more people to use more candles, which are about as bad as you can get in terms of energy efficiency.

As Wiesner sees it, Brussels did it all wrong. Rather than banning incandescent bulbs, Wiesner argues, it should have slapped a €5 surcharge on every incandescent bulb, arguing that it would have made people think a bit more before buying them. "That move alone would have been enough to allow the EU to achieve its goal," Wiesner says.

Reported by Alexander Jung

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