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As C.F.L. Sales Fall, More Incentives Urged

An official at the Department of Energy's [Energy Star program](#) has issued a grim assessment of the market for compact fluorescent light bulbs, or C.F.L.s, and is urging that funding for utility incentive programs be intensified.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Sales of compact fluorescent light bulbs are plunging, as many consumers stick with its predecessor, the incandescent bulb.

In a [September 18 letter](#) to C.F.L. industry stakeholders, Richard Karney, Energy Star products manager, said that national sales of the bulbs have declined 25 percent from their peak in 2007, with sales in some regions such as Vermont and parts of Massachusetts declining 35 to 50 percent. Further, he noted, shipments of C.F.L.s — which are supposed to last far longer than traditional incandescents — are down 49 percent in 2009 over 2007 levels.

“The market for C.F.L.s is far from transformed,” Mr. Karney wrote. “Based on additional data and analysis that D.O.E. has continued to gather, it’s apparent that the market is headed in the wrong direction.”

Even as sales drop, sponsors of incentive programs report they are facing “severe challenges” in getting continued funding for programs for basic C.F.L.s, according to Mr. Karney. “I am concerned, should these programs experience cuts in funding or outright cancellation, many of the gains we have achieved with this market in the last couple of years could be reversed,” he wrote.

Despite more than a decade of costly C.F.L. promotions — including giveaways, discounted prices and rebates — the bulbs have failed to capture the hearts (and sockets) of American consumers. Mr. Karney said that in regions where C.F.L. campaigns have been heaviest, 75 percent of screw-based sockets still contain incandescents. Nationally, about 90 percent of residential sockets are still occupied by incandescents, [D.O.E. has reported](#).

“These numbers paint a troubling picture,” Mr. Karney stated. “In these tough economic times, C.F.L. programs are especially important in getting consumers past the first cost barrier that often prevent the adoption of energy efficient products.”

Some argue that C.F.L. cost is no longer a barrier. Non-incentivized prices for C.F.L.s have come down dramatically in the last few years, with retailers selling the basic spiral types for two dollars apiece or less.

Michael Siminovitch, director of the [California Lighting Technology Center](#) at the University of California, Davis, believes incentive programs can be very effective, but only if they go hand in

with good products.

Government officials “are hanging the hook on the lack of incentives. It’s a little chicken and egg,” Mr. Siminovitch said. “We’ve had C.F.L. incentive programs for years and years. You have to have a sustainable product that survives on its own attributes.”

Large utilities in California are phasing out mass-market C.F.L. promotional programs, but [regulators in the state just approved](#) a \$78 million incentive budget to be spent between 2010 and 2012.

Ratepayer advocates in California have lobbied for a near-term phase out of such subsidies because they claim the market is already flooded with C.F.L. bulbs. As evidence, they point to an assessment by energy industry consultant [KEMA](#) which estimates about 42 million C.F.L.s purchased through utility programs are currently in storage in California residences. And then there are the [promotional C.F.L.s being auctioned off on eBay](#).

C.F.L.s subsidized by California ratepayers are “being resold on eBay all over the country and even in Canada,” said Mindy Spatt, spokesperson for [the Utility Reform Network](#). “The utility companies need to do more to provide real, on the ground savings to consumers, not just dump a few thousand light bulbs imported from China at Home Depot.”

Right now C.F.L.s must compete with standard incandescents, which can cost as little as quarter each. But due to [energy legislation passed by Congress in 2007](#), those incandescents will be phased out nationally beginning in 2012 and consumers will have to choose between compact fluorescents, light-emitting diode bulbs (L.E.D.s) and advanced incandescents.

The [newer incandescents](#), which use two to three times the energy of C.F.L.s, may become the light bulb of choice for consumers who are [turned off by C.F.L. performance](#) or the high price of LEDs.

“For those who believe The Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 will make C.F.L.s the default choice for consumer lighting needs,” wrote Mr. Karney, “I again urge caution.”