

GE PUSHES FOR EPA MERCURY PLAN ON EVE OF MAJOR AGENCY BULB CAMPAIGN

General Electric (GE), a major manufacturer of conventional incandescent light bulbs, is lobbying Congress to require EPA to develop a national recycling plan for mercury-containing compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) -- which the company also produces -- amid concerns that an imminent EPA-backed campaign to promote CFLs could increase releases of mercury to the environment.

EPA's Energy Star office -- along with Wal-Mart Stores, the nation's largest retailer, Yahoo and others -- at press time were slated Feb. 22 to launch a major CFL promotion campaign, known as 18 Seconds, that promoters hope could see Wal-Mart's sales of the bulbs increase to 100 million units a year, a 60 percent increase from the 40 million it sold in 2005 (*Inside EPA*, Feb. 9, p1).

Wal-Mart's campaign to promote CFLs has long posed a dilemma for EPA because while the bulbs significantly cut energy use and associated emissions, they also contain small but significant quantities of mercury. While agency officials have talked to Wal-Mart about bulb recycling as part of the campaign, an Energy Star official told *Inside EPA* last year that the agency was unable to impose any mandates for recycling, and was limited to encouraging retailers and consumers to use proper disposal methods. Wal-Mart has yet to commit to recycling.

At the same time, a bulb manufacturer that competes with GE says Wal-Mart and other efforts to promote CFLs puts GE in a difficult competitive position because it could undermine the company's position as Wal-Mart's major supplier of incandescent bulbs, which do not contain mercury but which consume 70 percent more energy than CFLs and have a far shorter lifespan. "Retailers are clearly trying to be the big boys on the block [for CFLs] and that is a tough position for GE," the source says.

Now a GE official says the company is meeting with key Senate committee staff to address end-of-life issues associated with promoting sales of CFLs, a GE source says. "We need to consider all the implications, including an increase in the waste stream of mercury. Are we adequately equipped to deal with that?" the GE source asks.

Beginning last week, the company started meeting with GOP staff on the Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee and Democratic staff on the Environment & Public Works (EPW) Committee.

The source says GE has had the most extensive contact with the Commerce committee so far, and is slated to meet with the staff again Feb. 26.

"What we're suggesting is instead of saying, 'We have the answer,' is to step back and ask EPA to look at this and say what solutions are appropriate, where the disposal centers would be, how they could be funded," the source explains. "Some states already regulate the disposal [of hazardous waste including mercury-containing CFLs] but it is piecemeal, and now we want to look at a national approach."

The GE source says it is unclear whether senators are prepared to introduce legislation on the issue, “but they certainly listened to us.” Senate staff could not be reached for comment.

The source adds that GE also plans to meet with EPA. “We’ve gone directly to Congress so far but EPA is on the agenda.”

The bulb manufacturing source says interest in CFLs has been building as consumer awareness about global warming has grown and as Wal-Mart is trying to be more environmentally responsible by launching its CFL efforts, among other initiatives. This has resulted in an “amazing transformation” of consumer attitudes toward CFLs, which have not been popular since their introduction in the United States in 1980.

The source adds that other CFL producers generally support recycling campaigns that do not require manufacturer take-backs and also do not force manufacturers to fund recycling programs, and says CFL makers would likely band together in opposition to any such plan.

“There is not enough margin for us to make them and take them back,” the source says, adding that manufacturers also should not have to help fund recycling because “there are recyclers out there that we fully support, but we should not be giving recyclers money. They make money. . . . What reason would there be” for us to subsidize?

The source suggests part of GE’s strategy in going to Congress now may be to get in front of the problem and raise the industry’s issues now before legislation is introduced that could impose a cost on manufacturers.

But the source questions whether GE’s recycling effort is also designed to help protect the market for its incandescent products. The source adds that could be problematic, particularly for GE’s “Ecomagination” campaign that seeks to highlight development of environmentally friendly products, such as advanced coal power turbines and water desalination plants.

An environmentalist who follows mercury issues says the fact that a major manufacturer is promoting recycling mandates is “encouraging” but remains a bit suspicious of GE’s efforts. The source notes that the last time manufacturers promoted recycling, it was to win millions of federal dollars to use in an education campaign. “Their idea has long been that the government has to pay for it,” the source says.

The source is also critical of EPA’s efforts on CFLs, noting, “EPA has gone out very strongly supporting purchasing these lamps but hasn’t had a similar push promoting recycling.”

Wal-Mart spokespeople could not be reached for comment. -- *Dawn Reeves*