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Hardware stores haven't seen rush to buy old-style lights, but questions about federal rules are common

Local hardware store operators say the federal government's indecision in determining the fate of the simple light bulb has left many consumers in the dark.

The Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 mandated that Americans shift to more energy-efficient lighting sources, setting into motion what has popularly been characterized as "the incandescent light bulb ban." The restrictions on bulbs was to go into effect this year.

Federal authorities noted that the typical light bulb, which uses the same burning filament technology introduced by Thomas Edison in the late 1800s, is just 10% efficient. That mean's 90% of the energy drawn by the bulbs is wasted as heat, and only 10% is converted to light.

The federal push for more efficient lighting encountered a significant obstacle in December when Congress adopted the $1 trillion, 1,200-page omnibus spending bill.

Although the edict remains on the books, Department of Energy funding for enforcement of the ban was pulled from the federal budget.

Even though enforcement of the bulb ban has been postponed, retailers say consumers are understandably befuddled by the lighting question.

Pete Kalies, co-owner of Ozaukee Ace Hardware in Grafton, said his staff has spent quite a bit of time explaining the lighting options available to customers.

"My understanding is the manufacturers have stopped making the old-style, 100-watt bulbs. What we have in our warehouse is all that we are going to have," Kalies said.

"This is not a case where the government is saying we can't sell the old-style bulbs, just that manufacturers have to stop making them."

The federal act says the push for more efficient lighting should be gradually phased in, ending in 2014 when 60-watt bulbs will no longer be made.

"At this point, there is no shortage. People haven't been coming in and buying large numbers of bulbs. But I imagine once one store runs out of their stock, people will run to the other stores to buy what they can," Kalies said.

The store has already sold more 100-watt bulbs than usual, but not an extreme number, he said.

When the federal government resumes its push to ban inefficient bulbs, Kalies said, consumers

have some viable options.

He said the technology used for compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) has vastly improved, while the cost has come down markedly.

“They can cost about twice as much as the conventional bulbs, but they use less energy and have been color-corrected to

eliminate the blue or yellow tint the old CFLs used to have,” Kalies said.

Still, he said some people are especially sensitive to the high-speed flickering that is part of the fluorescent technology.

For those people, Kalies suggests halogen or light-emitting diode (LED) bulbs.

“They are more expensive and are really a technology that is just starting to evolve,” he said.

Pam Richter, manager of Lauer True Value, said Port Washington customers have also been confused by the federal government’s backtracking on the light bulb restrictions.

“For customers who are especially concerned about the old bulbs disappearing, we find that they are often alternating the lights they use, with the old-style bulbs on either side of a row of CFLs,” Richter said.

“We have found that some people just don’t like the new bulbs because they seem dimmer, while others really like them. The real advantage to the new bulbs is they use less energy.”

Richter said the store staff has been telling customers there is no need to take drastic measures, like hoarding bulbs.

“At least, not yet,” she added.

Kalies said a bigger impact is likely to be felt this summer, when a federal ban on the production of the old ballast-style T12 fluorescent tubes goes into effect.

“With the incandescent bulbs, it is just a matter of screwing in a different kind of bulb. There really is no alternative bulb for the tubes. Once that supply runs out, all you’ll be able to do is put in new electrical fixtures,” he said.