



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 20, 2013

A Real Turn-off: Last Phase of Light Bulb Ban Takes Effect Jan. 1

As Americans watch 2013 fade away, they must also bid a fond farewell to Thomas Edison's most famous invention courtesy of Uncle Sam. Beginning January 1, Edison's classic incandescent light bulb will essentially be banned in the country that gave it birth — all to please environmental and corporate lobbyists.



Under the 2007 Energy Independence and Security Act, only bulbs that meet certain energy-efficiency standards may be manufactured in or imported into the United States. Incandescent bulbs cannot possibly meet those standards, and so they are, for all intents and purposes, prohibited.

Incandescent bulbs have been phased out over a period of years. One-hundred-watt and 75-watt bulbs have already disappeared, and in 2014, 60-watt and 40-watt bulbs are set to vanish.

Existing inventory of these bulbs may, however, continue to be sold and used, and according to [Fox News](#), “retailers are buying in bulk as the calendar winds down.” The Home Depot, the nation's largest bulb retailer, told Fox it has a “six-month stockpile” of bulbs, and its website urges consumers to “stock up on incandescent light bulbs before they are completely discontinued.”

The law containing the light bulb ban passed both houses of Congress overwhelmingly and was signed by President George W. Bush. Since that time, Republicans in the House of Representatives have made attempts to repeal the ban to no avail, even when they were in the majority.

The ban was sought not by average Americans, who were perfectly happy with low-cost incandescent bulbs, but by Washington lobbyists.

Corporations saw the ban as a way to improve their bottom lines. [Philips Electronics](#), one of the leading supporters of the ban, had already planned to phase out incandescent production by 2016, so prohibiting others from producing the cheaper bulbs prevented competition. [General Electric](#) (GE) took the occasion of the ban to close its last remaining U.S. incandescent-bulb factory, costing 200 jobs; production of permissible bulbs is now taking place in China.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, touted the law's alleged greenness. Incandescent bulbs, they said, waste energy, so switching to more energy-efficient bulbs will cut down on power use and thus the emission of dreaded “greenhouse gases” and mercury by power plants.

But mercury is a key component of compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs, the most popular alternative to incandescent bulbs; and unless CFLs are handled and disposed of properly, they can release mercury into the environment. Broken CFLs require a [complex clean-up process](#), according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Even when this process is followed, mercury can remain in the air and on the



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floor, where [further agitation can drive it back into the air](#). Spent CFLs should not be tossed in the trash but recycled. However, not everyone is aware of that, and some who are aware of it simply don't want to go to the extra effort of storing and transporting the bulbs. Thus, many CFLs end up in landfills, where their toxic contents can escape. CFLs may pose other health hazards as well, including [increased risk of cancer and migraines](#) and aggravation of light-sensitive skin conditions.

The CFL's primary competition in the now-incandescent-free marketplace is the LED bulb. LED bulbs don't pose the same health risks as CFLs, but they are "a pricey replacement, consumers are finding, despite dramatic price cuts over the past year," reported Fox News. "Home Depot sells a six pack of 60-Watt incandescents from GE for \$4.67, or 78 cents apiece. A six-pack of 60-Watt LEDs from Cree sells for an eye-watering \$77.82 — \$12.97 each."

Whether one chooses a CFL or an LED, he will encounter the same problem trying to install one in a fixture with a dimmer: It won't work. Only certain CFL and LED bulbs work with dimmers at all, and even those require specially made dimmers, not the kind that now work with practically any kind of incandescent bulb. Property owners will therefore be faced with the added expense of either replacing existing dimmers or buying halogen bulbs, which will continue to be available and will work with existing dimmers but are also more expensive than traditional bulbs.

Concern about these extra expenses is dismissed by supporters of the ban as much ado about nothing. The new bulbs, they say, are so much longer-lasting and energy-efficient that they will end up costing less than incandescents in the long run. While this may be true in some instances, in others it clearly will not. CFLs work best when they are allowed to burn for lengthy periods; a CFL may not outlast an incandescent if it is turned on and off frequently. CFLs also lose their luminosity over time and may thus have to be replaced more often than expected; a 2003-2004 [Energy Department study](#) found that one-quarter of the CFLs tested had dropped below their rated output after just 40 percent of their expected lives. Moreover, the loss of the heat generated by incandescent bulbs could lead to more energy use and higher heating bills in cold climates. "The replacement of inefficient lights with efficient lights that produce less waste heat will lead to increased fossil fuel use for non-electric space heating," a Canadian power company [argued](#) in 2009. How's that for "saving the planet"?

There are aesthetic concerns, too. CFLs and LEDs do not emit light of the same color as incandescent bulbs, which can change the appearance of objects in a room where they are used. Artists, interior decorators, and others concerned with lighting's effects on their livelihoods have been quite vocal in their opposition to the incandescent-bulb ban, with some stockpiling bulbs for years in advance.

Decorator Bunny Williams, for instance, told the [New York Times](#) in 2011 that "she can't abide the sickly hue of a twisty" CFL and is "buy[ing] more wattage" on her every trip to Costco.

Ann Pyne, another anti-CFL decorator, observed with some amusement: "I keep thinking of my CFL friend who proselytized so energetically and filled his house with them, but whose wife compensated by using so many candles — and turning off all the nauseous-looking bulbs. Is he a light bulb liberal?"

Ordinary consumers won't have an easy time telling which bulb will suit them best, either. "Many people lament the confusing terminology of color temperatures that dictates whether CFLs emit a pale blue (5,000-6,500 Kelvin) or whiter (3,500-4,100K) light, neither of which quite matches the familiar light of an incandescent light bulb (2,700-3,000K)," wrote Fox News. "For energy-efficient bulbs to match expectations, they'll simply have to improve." On the other hand, given that they will have little competition from incandescents (certain specialty incandescent bulbs will still be permitted, though



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they are more expensive than standard bulbs), there will be less urgency for them to improve. Consumers will be stuck with whatever bulbs the government allows them to buy.

All this, of course, could have been avoided if only the federal government had abided by the Constitution, which nowhere empowers it to prohibit the manufacture of any product or to dictate the specifics of production. But as usual, green — lobbyists' cash and environmentalists' ideology — won out over liberty and law, and Americans are now paying the price for this not-so-bright idea.



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