

Incandescent ban evokes nanny state

Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor



I've never thought of incandescents as dangerous contraband, but beginning September 30th, the Edison light bulb will be analogous with moonshine liquor and mind-altering drugs. Absent legislative action (which caused this mess in first place), this quintessential lighting technology faces mandatory retirement.

A bit of a recap: In 2007, Congress passed the [Energy Independence and Security Act](#) [1], which purports to "move the United States toward greater energy independence and security, to increase the production of clean renewable fuels, to protect consumers, to increase the efficiency of products, buildings, and vehicles, to promote research on and deploy greenhouse gas capture and storage options, and to improve the energy performance of the Federal Government, and for other purposes."

Among other things, this landmark piece of legislation sets efficiency standards for household lighting as it relates to illumination and energy consumption. For [example](#) [2], a [typical](#) [3] A19 light bulb which outputs 1,750 lumens (i.e., a 100-watt bulb) cannot rate higher than 72 watts.

The bill contains provisions that effectively ban all incandescent light bulbs (with certain exceptions, including 3-way lamps) by 2014. The full specifications are below.

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“GENERAL SERVICE INCANDESCENT LAMPS

Rated Lumen Ranges	Maximum Rate Wattage	Minimum Rate Life-time	Effective Date
1490–2600	72	1,000 hrs	1/1/2012
1050–1489	53	1,000 hrs	1/1/2013
750–1049	43	1,000 hrs	1/1/2014
310–749	29	1,000 hrs	1/1/2014

“MODIFIED SPECTRUM GENERAL SERVICE INCANDESCENT LAMPS

Rated Lumen Ranges	Maximum Rate Wattage	Minimum Rate Life-time	Effective Date
1118–1950	72	1,000 hrs	1/1/2012
788–1117	53	1,000 hrs	1/1/2013
563–787	43	1,000 hrs	1/1/2014
232–562	29	1,000 hrs	1/1/2014”;

The first phase of the ban...er..."efficiency standard" was to have begun on January 1, 2012. But Republicans fought back and, in a deal to stave off a government shutdown in December 2011, earned a stay of execution for the Edison bulb — they inserted a rider which forbade the Department of Energy from using federal dollars to enforce the incandescent ban...until September 30th, that is.

The EU initiated a similar ban, which [successfully concluded](#) [4] on September 1st of this year. It is now illegal to sell incandescent light bulbs in Europe. Think about that. If you sell an Edison bulb in the UK, you could go to jail...over an incandescent light bulb.

And the reaction was entirely predictable — massive hoarding. It seems that consumers don't like being told what they can and can't buy.

The EU ban was very unpopular from the beginning.

"Look forward in the coming months to tales of hapless market traders and back-street electricians being snatched upon by righteous green activists and hauled off to the courts as if they were heroin dealers," said [Michael Hanlon](#) [5] of Mail Online.

I'm reminded of the kitschy "Green Police" Super Bowl ad from several years back. That was clearly a joke. These new lighting directives aren't so funny.

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From the ad: "Tragedy strikes tonight where a man has just been arrested for possession of an incandescent light bulb." Eerie...

And with tongue planted firmly in cheek, Max Davidson of The Telegraph [noted that](#) [6], "Tony Blair probably felt a 100-watt glow of pride as he and his fellow heads of government waved through the proposal at a European Council meeting in March 2007. But the implementation of the new EU directive looks set to cause a worse headache than reading the Encyclopaedia Britannica by candlelight."



Incandescent bulbs

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aren't the most efficient technology — about 90% of their energy is dispersed through heat. But nothing beats the warm glow of an Edison bulb, and discerning patrons prefer incandescents for aesthetic reasons or instances (i.e. cold weather) where heat dissipation is crucial.

And price is a crucial factor. CFLs, Halogens, and LEDs (particularly the latter) entail a higher upfront cost for long-term savings. The lifetime of most LEDs is measured in decades. But not everyone is willing to make that investment (nor should we force them).

It's no small investment — your typical A19 LED equivalent costs anywhere from \$15 to \$50. Even with the promised energy savings, that can seem daunting to somebody used to paying .25 for Edison bulbs.

But this isn't about energy savings, long-term value, lumens, or efficiency. This is a furious dogfight that transcends light bulbs: bureaucrats who allegedly know what's best for you vs. free-market solutions. Or put another way: the nanny state vs. consumer choice.

Four years ago, I wrote about the EPA's clumsy attempts to certify incandescent bulbs through Energy Star by artificially lowering the standards. They released a "technical amendment" (version 4.2), skipped the testing period and public review, and declared it effective immediately — all in the name of removing a "competitive disadvantage" for general illumination and decorative light fixtures (i.e. incandescents).

This sort of bureaucratic tinkering is just as heinous as a general product ban. And it's entirely unnecessary. We should neither prop up legacy technologies nor force them into early obsolescence. The free markets should decide. And Energy Star should reward advanced technologies, not hand out participation trophies.

We're at an impasse in this country. We've expended huge political capital and fought tooth and nail over healthcare reform while an acute manifestation of the nanny state has slipped in the back door. The incandescent ban cannot and should not be allowed to stand.

Should the federal government facilitate adoption of newer technologies by legislating older ones from existence? Or should consumers have a say in the matter?

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- [1] <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c110:8:./temp/~c110iTtMw9::>
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- [4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/aug/31/lightbulbs-incandescent-europe>
- [5] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1210150/MICHAEL-HANLON-Making-illegal-sell-100-watt-light-bulbs-simply-dimwitted.html>
- [6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/greenerliving/6083119/European-Union-ban-on-lightbulbs-leads-to-a-dim-future.html>