

LETTER: Separating fact from fiction

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One Change, the not for profit organization that runs the award-winning campaign Project Porchlight, which is responsible for handing out over 2 million free CFL bulbs throughout Canada and some parts of the U.S. since 2005, would like to respond to your story that ran in the Grande Prairie Daily Herald Tribune on March 6, 2009, "Compact fluorescents might not be such a bright idea after all: Study". The story implied that CFL bulbs are not as energy-efficient as previously thought because people may turn up their thermostat in the winter to make up for the loss of heat, due to CFLs emitting less heat than incandescent light bulbs.

One Change always welcomes any new research on CFL bulbs and agrees that the public should have all of the information related to CFL bulbs prior to making the switch from incandescent bulbs. That said, we also think it's important to separate fact from fiction.

Based on our research, we strongly feel that considering incandescent bulbs as viable sources for space heating is tantamount to endorsing a culture of waste. If hydroelectricity is the preferable source of energy for space heating, efforts need to be extended toward implementing systems that efficiently distribute and regulate heat. Incandescent light bulbs do neither.

Essentially, the assertion that switching from incandescent bulbs to CFL bulbs will create an increased demand on space heaters rests on the assumption that homeowners keep all their lights on, all the time. However, Canadians are becoming more energy conscious all the time, bringing about a culture of conservation, where turning off unnecessary lights is common sense. When lights are used sensibly, the heat they provide diminishes and they are proportionately less likely to provide heat that actually registers on the thermostat. Thus, their heat is truly wasted; they may increase room temperature incrementally, but dedicated space heaters will continue to work at the same rate. Also, because most light fixtures are positioned on the ceiling, their heat rises.

In order for incandescent bulbs to 'make more sense' than CFL bulbs in a house where electricity is derived from hydro and heating from fossil fuels, many light bulbs would need to be run for extended periods of time. The amount of time lights are on is a crucial variable, because offsets can only be derived from heat provided by incandescent bulbs when thermostats register the changes in temperature associated with their operation. Thermostats will register heat provided by light bulbs as part of the overall room temperature only when enough lights have been operating long enough to affect the overall temperature.

Suggesting that residents not only continue to use incandescent bulbs, but also keep them on as much as possible during the cold months of the years is confusing and counterintuitive. Such a suggestion would constitute mixed messaging: "Please conserve. Please don't conserve." Reducing demand on hydroelectricity also translates into GHG reductions in other jurisdictions, as surplus electricity is sold to grids where it displaces fossil fuel generation.

One Change stands for promoting energy conservation as common sense behaviour. Promoting CFL bulbs runs parallel to efforts to promote energy conservation. And Project Porchlight consistently stimulates not only the installation of the free CFL bulbs that we have distributed in communities across Ontario, Yukon, Saskatchewan, B.C. and Alberta, but also the use of other energy efficiency products.

The bottom line in this situation is that light fixtures and bulbs are neither designed nor positioned for heating efficiency. Incandescent light bulbs are an inefficient way of heating a home. We would be greatly disappointed if people would think that switching to CFL bulbs isn't energy-efficient, because it's simply not true!

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