



Mercury in some florescent lights presents health hazard

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SAN FRANCISCO —



As they sift through the 2,700 tons of material including garbage and recycling comes through Recology's San Francisco facility every day, what workers don't want to see in the trash are compact florescent lamps.

Each bulb, or CFL as they are called, contains a small amount of mercury.

"You just can't stick them in the trash," explained Frank Alioto of AERC Recycling Solutions. "You can't landfill them. You can't do anything like that."

The EPA estimates only two percent of CFLs are being recycled, though little data has been collected.

"We all are busy [and] get lazy. It ends up in the trash," said CFL user Heather Hughes. "The recycling is hard, because you have to go to certain centers and do it. We do, but it's difficult."

San Francisco recycles 7,600 pounds of CFLs every year. Most are picked up from 30 drop off locations throughout the city.

"We're doing an awful lot of outreach to try and help people understand they require special handling," said Recology public relations manager Robert Reed. "And we're trying to make it as convenient as possible for people to do the right thing."

The used CFLs are packed and shipped to AERC in Hayward. AERC the only facility in Northern California licensed to take the mercury out of florescent bulbs.

To take that powder out, crews in protective gear feed the bulbs into a special machine.

The extracted mercury powder is packed into large drums.

"Surprisingly we do not see that many CFLs yet," said Alioto.

He believes so few CFLs are being recycled because of a lack of awareness. He also believes their long life means few have needed to be recycled.

Consumers can bring used CFLs to hardware stores or companies such as Ikea which recycle them.

Labels on the bulbs currently state there's mercury inside. But starting next year, the federal government will require new packaging that includes information about their safe disposal.

New legislation is also working its way through Sacramento would add a fee to CFLs---to fund a mandatory recycling program.

"I think what needs to be changed and heavily looked at is education to the consumer," said Lindsay Hassett of Evolve Electric.

The bottom line is that when the lights go out on CFLs, experts say you need to treat them the same as hazardous waste such as lead paint or batteries.

To find a recycling center near your home and for tips on how to clean up if a CFL breaks, go to earth911.com.