

## **Please Keep Your Fluorescent Light Bulbs Out of the Trash; They Can Be Dangerous!!!**

*RRWA ([www.rrwatershed.org](http://www.rrwatershed.org)) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration and watershed enhancement. This article was authored by Charles Yanucil, a representative for Cotati in RRWA.*

Fluorescent Lamps and Compact Fluorescent Lamps (CFLs, *they're those new funny looking light bulbs*) are increasingly becoming more popular and replacing incandescent lamps as a practical way to reduce energy consumption and the generation of greenhouse gasses that contribute to global warming. They require far less energy than typical incandescent light bulbs and cost about one fourth as much to operate. Typical savings is about \$30 over the life of one bulb.

While the use of CFLs is an excellent way for everyday folks to help the environment and fatten their wallets all while "being green", there are some other considerations that many people may not be aware of. Fluorescent Lamps and CFLs contain small amounts of the element Mercury and need to be disposed of properly.

Mercury is a highly toxic metal that accumulates in living tissue. Improper disposal of these bulbs allows their toxic ingredients to end up in your local landfill. The Mercury can leach into the soil and water, poisoning fish and other wildlife as it makes its way through the food chain. Remember hearing about Mercury in shellfish and canned tuna?

Still, the benefits of CFLs far outweigh the negatives. For example, a typical CFL contains about 5 milligrams of Mercury. A coal-fired power plant may release approximately 30-50 milligrams of additional mercury into the environment to power an incandescent lamp compared to a comparable CFL over a 10,000 hour period. So even if all of the Mercury in a CFL is leaked into the environment, it still makes sense to use CFLs.

So don't stop switching to CFLs, but be aware that with a little additional care you can help protect our environment even further. And effective February 2006, the State of California passed legislation making it unlawful to dispose of any lamps that contain Mercury in the solid waste trash (other types of lamps are also affected by this new law including: metal halide, sodium lamps and mercury vapor lamps).

Your local government entity that is responsible for waste collection can provide a list of facilities or collection events for CFLs and other household products that contain dangerous ingredients. You can also check out [www.earth911.org](http://www.earth911.org) to find recycling centers in your area. Large stores such as Ikea and Wal-Mart are also initiating lamp disposal programs and collection events. Ikea has set up kiosks in their stores where customers can dispose of their used lights, regardless of where they were purchased.

Here are some simple steps you can take to manage your spent bulbs:

- Never break or crush the bulbs. Mercury evaporates quickly and is just as hazardous in its gaseous form. (If you accidentally break a bulb you should open up the windows and sweep up the broken pieces - don't use a vacuum. Use a damp cloth to pick up the finest particles and place in a sealed plastic bag for proper disposal.)
- Place and seal the bulbs in packaging that is equivalent to that used to ship new bulbs.
- Label the package - "Universal Waste - Lamp(s)".
- Store the bulbs in an area with a sign "Universal Waste - Lamp(s)".
- Bring the used bulbs to your local recycling center or ship them through a lamp recycler.

Right now, only 10-15 percent of bulbs are being recycled in California. People are throwing these bulbs out with their regular trash because they either don't know they are not supposed to, or don't realize it's bad for the environment to do so.

Increasing the number of bulbs that are recycled may come down to more businesses getting in on the act of offering to collect bulbs at their stores and increasing public awareness. So don't be shy, ask your local store manager that sells these bulbs or your waste collection entity if they sponsor any disposal programs. And if they don't, tell them they should!