NEWS from STATE FIRE

NEW YORK STATE
OFFICE OF FIRE PREVENTION & CONTROL
99 Washington Avenue, Suite 500, Albany, NY 12210-2833

Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor **Floyd A. Madison, State Fire Administrator**

Media Contact:
Dennis Michalski
(518) 292-2310
dmichalski@dhses.ny.gov

FOR RELEASE:
IMMEDIATE, Friday
February 11, 2011

STATE FIRE ISSUES SAFETY ALERT ON COMPACT FLUORESCENT LIGHT BULBS

NYSERDA Recommends Consumers Look for ENERGY STAR® Qualified CFLs

The Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services' Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC) today issued a Safety Alert regarding Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs.

State Fire Administrator Floyd A. Madison said the office has recently received inquiries concerning potential fire safety hazards associated with the use of these light bulbs, more commonly called CFLs.

"The investigation conducted by our Arson Bureau concluded that there is no fire hazard associated with CFLs that have been properly tested and listed by national testing laboratories," Madison said.

Madison said, however, that the public, firefighters and fire investigators need to be aware of the "normal and expected" signs as a CFL nears the end of its life span or burns out because as this information can be misinterpreted as a "problem" with the bulb.

- Some behavior and failure modes will be different from those experienced with incandescent bulbs. CFLs should be replaced at the first sign of odor, smoke, discoloration or erratic behavior.

- When CFLs stop working, some will simply stop emitting light while others will create a "pop" sound and then vent a distinct odor and visible smoke.

- The base of the bulb will discolor with age and may even show a black spot. This is a result of the breakdown of the bulb's ballast which is located in the base. Melted plastic, where the coil connects to the ballast/base is a sign that the heat has escaped from the ballast which is a design feature of the bulb.

- As CFLs reach the end of their life span they may grow dim and overheating at the end of tubes and the darkening of the plastic where the tubes enter the base may be noted. The normal life span of a CFL may be reduced when used in fixtures which are frequently turned on and off.

- Follow the manufacturer's recommendations when using CFL's to include looking for the Underwriters Laboratory UL listing or other laboratory testing seal when purchasing. CFL's should not be used with dimmers unless specifically labeled and listed by the manufacturer for such use.

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The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) recommends that consumers look for energy-efficient CFLs with the ENERGY STAR label, which are tested by Underwriters Laboratory for fire safety. To ensure proper installation, follow the instructions on the box.

CFLs produce about 75 percent less heat than standard light bulbs, so are generally safer to operate than incandescent bulbs. As with any product, however, all CFLs are not equal, and the ENERGY STAR label is assurance of product quality and safety, according to NYSERDA.

The calls to OFPC, Madison said, were prompted by recent postings on the Internet and inquiries from fire officials raising potential concerns of fire hazards associated with certain CFLs. The OFPC Arson Bureau investigated these concerns with the following findings:

Two manufacturer's recalls were identified pertaining to CFL's and their fire safety hazards.

GLOBE Electric had a recall which involved a limited number of 13-watt CFLs manufactured between 2002 and March 2003. These bulbs were not sold in the United States and there were no confirmed cases of fires involving the recalled units. The history of the recall including the problem and corrective actions taken, as well as the affected date codes can be viewed at the Globe Electric website www.globe-electric.com.

TRISONIC had a recall which involved its 15-, 20-, 22- and 25-watt CFLs manufactured in 2007 and 2008. These bulbs were sold at discount stores for $1.00 to $1.50 each. The units were recalled over concern of a condenser over heating in the base causing the base to break apart. Two fires were reported. The problem was corrected with the placement of a fuse in the base of the unit which is used to protect the condenser. This technology is now used throughout the CFL industry. The history of the recall including the model numbers affected can be found at www.trisonic.com.

In addition to researching the two noted recalls, Richard Barlette, Chief of the OFPC Arson Bureau, said further information was obtained relating to the applicability of Underwriters Laboratory [UL] listing and testing of CFL's to include the following points:

UL listing of CFLs is not mandatory. Manufacturers of any product including CFLs may submit their product to Underwriters Laboratory for a product review in accordance with specific UL criteria. If determined to be compliant, UL will list the device and allow the UL listing logo to be placed on the product.

UL does have established criteria for CFLs, including a requirement that all bases be made of non-combustible materials. CFL's meeting UL criteria will display the trademark UL seal on the exterior of the bulbs base housing, [example photo]. Further information on the UL listing process and associated criteria for CFL can be obtained by contacting UL at 1-877-854-3577 or visiting its website at www.UL.com.

The OFPC Safety Alert was distributed to the Fire Service and emergency response community across the state and the National Association of State Fire Marshals.

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