

## Lev Buslovich

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**Subject:** Certain Bulbs Being Fazed Out

**Importance:** Low

Bachmann is pro-choice on bulbs  
KEVIN DIAZ, Star Tribune

WASHINGTON - How many members of Congress does it take to change a light bulb? Americans may soon find out, courtesy of a contrarian piece of legislation introduced this month by Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota.

Titled the "Light Bulb Freedom of Choice Act," the bill seeks to repeal the nationwide phase-out of conventional light bulbs, the kind that have been used for more than a century - - pretty much since the invention of the incandescent light bulb.

Bachmann, a first-term Republican, is challenging the nation's embrace of energy-efficient compact fluorescent lights, saying the government has no business telling consumers what kind of light bulbs they can buy.

"This is an issue of science over fads and fashions," Bachmann said in an interview Tuesday.

"Congress tends to jump on whatever the current buzz is in the 24-hour news cycle," Bachmann said.

Her bill, the first challenge of its kind, raises safety questions about the small amounts of mercury in fluorescent lights. It also lands her squarely in the middle of the debate over global warming. In recent remarks to a gathering of Sherburne County Republicans -- reported in the West Sherburne Tribune -- Bachmann called any human connection to global warming "voodoo, nonsense, hokum, a hoax."

"By 2012, incandescent light bulbs will be no more," Bachmann said. "Fluorescent bulbs are more polluting because of their mercury content. We are working on a light bulb bill. If the Democrats can hose up a light bulb, don't trust them with the country."

The electrical and manufacturing industries, in a rare alliance with environmentalists, portray Bachmann's mercury concerns as overblown. They argue that fluorescent lights actually reduce mercury emissions in the long run. That's because the new bulbs use so much less electricity, much of which is produced by burning coal, which emits greenhouse gases and mercury.

"That's not just the industry talking," said Mark Kohorst of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association. "That's an accepted aspect of these products, and that's why they've been promoted so heavily."

Whatever one's views on global warming, Kohorst said, the energy savings of fluorescent lights are real. "The lamp thing has merit," he said. "Unfortunately, [Bachmann] has lumped it in with this whole conspiracy thing."

Environmentalists are more emphatic in downplaying the mercury hazards of fluorescent bulbs, which they say are minimal.

"There is 200 times more mercury in each filling in Congresswoman Bachmann's teeth than there is in a compact fluorescent light bulb," said Julia Bovey, a spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The federal government is also on board, with Congress' last energy bill, signed by President Bush in December, having mandated a phase-in to energy-saving bulbs starting in 2012.

But in a letter to congressional colleagues earlier this month, Bachmann asked for support of her legislation to reverse that mandate, unless a comptroller general report shows clear economic, health and environmental benefits from the switchover to fluorescent lights.

Her letter says that the energy bill "forces consumers and businesses to use only light bulbs chosen for them by the government" and that further study "is simple due diligence."

#### Mercury disposal an issue

The mercury content of fluorescent light bulbs has long been a concern of federal and state regulators. Minnesota is one of a handful of states that ban the disposal of fluorescent lights as general waste, and Xcel Energy, the state's biggest utility, actively reimburses many customers for recycling them.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) outline a series of steps that homeowners should take to clean up broken fluorescent lights: Open windows, use rubber gloves, dispose of all material in sealed bags and remove it to a hazardous waste facility.

"It's almost as if you have to call the haz-mat team out to your home," Bachmann said.

Environmentalists argue that most of the steps are the same as cleanup from any broken glass accident, except for the special disposal requirements.

Industry experts say the amount of mercury in new compact fluorescent lights -- about 5 milligrams, on average -- is small but significant enough to warrant common-sense safety precautions and consumer recycling efforts to keep it out of landfills.

"There are minuscule amounts of mercury, but it's a hazardous waste, and we want to take it seriously," said Kim Sherman, product portfolio manager at Xcel Energy.

MPCA spokesman Sam Brungardt said the use of compact fluorescent lights, which use one-fourth the energy of regular bulbs, should certainly be encouraged. If new legislation is needed, he said, it should be to encourage consumers to recycle. "You have to make it easy to do this," he said.

#### Growing market

With or without the help of Congress, the market for compact fluorescent lights is growing. They are now more than 20 percent of the consumer market in the United States, up from 1 percent in 2001, according to Steve Rosenstock of the Edison Electric Institute.

"These bulbs use significantly less energy, so consumers can save lots of money by switching over," said Jason Mathers of the Environmental Defense Fund.

Fluorescent bulbs, however, cost several dollars more than regular household light bulbs, a factor that Congress failed to take into account when it passed its new mandate, Bachmann said.

For her, changing a light bulb should remain a matter of personal freedom.

"I was just outraged that Congress would want to substitute its judgment for the judgment of the American people," she said. "It struck me as a massive Big Brother intrusion into our homes and our lives."

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