

Congress flips dimmer switch on light bulb law

WASHINGTON (The Associated Press) - Dec 16 - By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

Republicans in Congress are flipping the dimmer switch on a law that sets new energy-savings standards for light bulbs.

They've reached a deal to delay until October enforcement of standards that some fear will bring about the end of old-style, 100-watt bulbs. GOP lawmakers say they're trying to head off more government interference in people's lives.

But environmentalists and the light bulb industry say the move is not too bright.

Language postponing enforcement of the light bulb law - it was set to take effect Jan. 1 - was included in a massive spending bill that funds the government through September. The House passed the measure on Friday, with approval expected Saturday in the Senate.

Rep. Fred Upton, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said the light bulb delay shows Congress is listening to the American people.

"We heard the message loud and clear," said Upton, R-Mich. "Americans don't want government standards determining how they light their homes."

Upton said he was not opposed to the more efficient - and expensive - curlicue fluorescents that have become increasingly familiar in recent years. But he said government should not penalize those who prefer traditional, incandescent bulbs.

"New lighting options are great news for the public, but the lesson is that markets and consumer demand are the best drivers of innovation and new choices," Upton said.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said the move would have little practical consequence, since it does not affect a 2007 law that requires manufacturers to produce or import more efficient bulbs. The five largest light bulb manufacturers have already switched to making and selling the more efficient bulbs, Bingaman said, so the enforcement delay only serves to confuse the public.

"Blocking funds to enforce minimum standards works against our nation getting the full benefits of energy efficiency," said Bingaman, D-N.M., a key sponsor of the 2007 law.

A group representing light bulb manufacturers spoke out against the delay, which applies only to 100-watt bulbs. Tighter standards for 75-watt bulbs take effect in 2013, and lower wattage bulbs must be more efficient by 2014.

"American manufacturers have invested millions of dollars in energy-efficient light bulbs," said Joseph Higbee, a spokesman for the National Electric Manufacturers Association, which represents 95 percent U.S. light bulb makers.

Delaying enforcement of the standards "undermines those investments and creates regulatory uncertainty and consumer confusion," he said, adding that a lack of federal enforcement "allows bad actors to sell non-compliant products" to consumers who may be unable to tell the difference between an energy-efficient bulb and one that isn't.

The new law blocks the Energy Department from enforcing efficiency standards, but it does not prevent states from enforcing their own standards.

Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, called the light-bulb provision "an early Christmas present for all Americans" and said it strikes a blow against expensive fluorescents that he said are not as reliable as the old-style incandescents that have changed little since Thomas Edison's day.

"This means Americans can continue to flip the switch on an affordable and reliable product, instead of turning to one that costs five times more and may not live up to manufacturers' promises," said Barton, a former House energy chairman who opposed the 2007 law and has worked to overturn it ever since.

Jim Presswood, federal energy policy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, called the GOP-backed delay dim-witted.

"It's just a completely ridiculous move by Congress," Presswood said. "It undermines the ability of the Energy Department to enforce standards that are going to give consumers tremendous savings as well as reduce pollution."