

5. ENERGY POLICY: Light bulb law stokes fury in Senate hearing

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Light bulbs sparked heated discussions this morning during a Senate legislative hearing on two energy efficiency bills.

Republicans used the hearing in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to blast congressionally approved lighting efficiency standards and the Energy Department's implementation of them.

At issue is a provision in a 2007 energy law that would phase out the sale of the most energy-hungry light bulbs over the next few years, starting at the end of this year. Republicans want to repeal the language, saying it represents government overreach. But Democrats argue the standards are crucial to save energy and spur investment in new, more efficient lighting options.

"People in Idaho are just astonished that the federal government is telling them what kind of light bulb to put in their home," Sen. Jim Risch (R-Idaho) said.

Republicans are concerned that the lighting standards in question would eliminate the sale of the cheapest lighting option on the market today, the incandescent light bulb, and that they would force consumers to buy the more expensive or potentially hazardous options on the market today.

Democrats and the lighting industry argued that the law will not ban use of incandescents or force consumers to use compact fluorescents (CFLs), a controversial lighting option that uses significantly less energy than incandescents but contains mercury and does not produce the same quality of light.

"I realize the statement you made that traditional bulbs are not going away. But manufacturers make decisions based on where consumers herd," Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) said, indicating that consumers are moving toward CFLs. "I've converted every bulb in my house [to CFLs], and I have absolutely no idea how to dispose of a mercury bulb. I have no where to put it -- I'm going to throw it in the trash, and that's not good environmentally, is it?"

The panel's chairman, Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), tried to keep the discussion centered on clearing up misconceptions surrounding the controversial law, such as the notions that it bans incandescents or forces consumers to buy CFLs.

"I hope the record today will confirm, as I understand, that not only will consumers continue to be able to buy incandescent bulbs that look the same as those they currently buy, but provide the same quality light as traditional incandescent bulbs, but these bulbs will last longer, use less energy and save consumers money," Bingaman said.

Despite his efforts, Republicans continued their tirade.

"You busybodies always want to do something that tell us how to make our lives better," Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) told a DOE official.

"Now, it's not that I'm against conservation; I'm all for energy conservation," Paul added. But enforcing standards is an "affront to the sensibility, idea, notion of free marketplace, of capitalism, of freedom of choice."

He likened the bulb controversy to abortion in a heated exchange with the DOE official, Kathleen Hogan, deputy assistant secretary of energy efficiency.

"There is hypocrisy that goes on in people that claim to believe in some choices but don't want to let the consumer decide what they can buy and install in their house," Paul said. "I find it really appalling and hypocritical and I think there should be some self-evaluation by the administration on the idea that you favor a woman's right to abortion but you don't favor a woman or man's right to choose what kind of light bulb, what kind of dishwasher, what kind of washing machine" to use.

But Hogan was adamant that the standards do not restrict personal choice. "I'm pro-choice on bulbs," she said.

Bingaman quickly came to Hogan's defense, noting that DOE is only implementing standards enacted by Congress.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) also rushed to Hogan's defense, chiding Paul for name-calling.

"I appreciate your frustration and I share it in some ways," she said to Paul. But "I think it behooves us all to not engage in name-calling of those officials carrying out the work that Congress has asked them to do."

Bingaman does not support the bill ([S. 395](#)) under discussion today that would repeal the 2007 language. And he said he was not surprised by his Republican colleagues' comments.

"No, no, I'm aware that there's a sentiment about this. We were aware of that," Bingaman said after the hearing. "That's why we had the hearing."

S. 395 from Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) has 27 Republican co-sponsors, including Burr, Paul and Risch and Sens. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), Dan Coats (R-Ind.) and Mike Lee (R-Utah), who are also members of the committee.

The committee also heard testimony on [S. 398](#), an energy efficiency bill from Bingaman and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), the committee's ranking member. A committee aide said the committee has no immediate plans to mark up either bill.

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