

FIX IT UP!
Bruce Turner

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What California's New Lighting Regs Mean to You

It hasn't gotten much attention in the papers, but your plans to build, expand or remodel your home will be directly affected by new state regulations starting next month.

On October 1, the California Energy Commission's new 2005 Building Energy Efficiency Standards go into effect. From this point forward, at least 50% of the lighting in your home must be energy-efficient. High-efficacy lights – or luminaries, as the regulations call them – are now required for just about every room in your home, although existing lights can stay in place.

The regs apply to new homes, additions to existing homes, remodeling projects and even the new chandelier in your dining room. Half the installed wattage in your kitchen, for example, must now be high-efficiency lighting, and the lights that aren't must be on a separate switch. In bathrooms, laundry rooms and garages, all lights must be either high efficiency or controlled by an occupant sensor that automatically turns the light on and off. Similar energy and sensor restrictions are now in place for all the other rooms in your home (except the closets) and all the outdoor lighting. (If you're interested, the regulations are explained on the California Energy Commission website at <http://www.energy.ca.gov/title24/2005standards/index.html>.)

Do you have to comply with these new regs every time you change a light bulb in a lamp? Well, technically they do apply, but realistically there won't be enforcement against individual homeowners. Where the regulations come into play is with construction or remodeling projects that require permits. Whether you're getting a permit yourself or your contractor is doing so, the plans will be inspected for compliance with the new energy standards, and plans that don't comply won't be approved.

So what does all this mean to you? To begin with, we do need to save energy, and this sort of regulation is a big step in the right direction, but as you might expect, it's going to cost you a little money and perhaps a little aggravation. You're going to have a lot more lighting choices to sort through, and the first choice for many consumers is likely to be fluorescent light.

To a lot of people, that rubs a sore spot. They say that fluorescent lights flicker and hum, that they're cold and harsh instead of warm and soft, that they are just plain unpleasant. But that's not really true if you're willing to spend a little extra time and money to find just the right quality fixture. You get what you pay for when it comes to lighting, particularly fluorescents.

We'll talk more about fluorescent lighting and other ways to handle these new lighting regulations in our next column.

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