

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Flourescents and Other Ideas for Meeting New Energy Regs

In our last column, we talked about the California Energy Commission's new 2005 Building Energy Efficiency Standards that go into effect October 1. From now on, at least half the lighting in your home must be energy-efficient, and there are new rules for lighting, switches and sensors for just about every room in your home, as well as the outside lighting. The regs apply to new construction – homes and home additions – and any remodeling projects that require building permits. If all you're doing is changing out your own luminaires, you have nothing to worry about, but all building plans submitted for permits must comply with the new energy standards to be approved.

So how should you deal with these new regulations? Well, you now have many more lighting choices to sort through, and the likelihood is that you'll be spending a little more money, although some of that expense will hopefully be offset by reduced energy bills.

To begin with, whether you're installing a new light fixture or having a contractor remodel your kitchen, you should definitely consider flourescent lighting, because it meets the new energy standards much better than incandescent lighting. I know lots of people have strong biases about flourescent lights – “they flicker, they hum, they're harsh, they're cold” – but the fact is that flourescent bulb technology has come a long way in recent years. Color quality is much warmer, the flickering and humming are no longer issues, and today's flourescent bulbs don't look much like the ugly ring-shaped fixture in your grandmother's kitchen.

Most consumers aren't aware of what's out there in flourescents, and just how good it can be if you spend the time and money to get a quality fixture. The new regs are certainly going to drive manufacturers to put more money into flourescent engineering and raise consumer awareness of flourescents, and I'd be willing to bet that in ten or fifteen years we will have seen a dramatic changeover in how we light our homes.

The new regs are also likely to produce a boom in business for lighting designers, who get paid for advising people on how to meet their needs for beautiful lighting while meeting the standards as well. Architects and certified kitchen and bathroom designers will be able to help you as well. But you can be your own lighting consultant to a certain extent.

There are three basic kinds of lighting – ambient, task and mood. Ambient lighting is the background illumination in a room, like a living room lamp. Task lighting is what illuminates bathroom vanities, kitchens and other work spaces, and that's where the new regs will have a considerable impact. The standards now say that at least 50% of the installed wattage in your kitchen must be high-efficacy, and most of that wattage is task lighting. But you can light up dark corners of your kitchen with under-cabinet lighting that will be both lovely and efficient.

If you do lighting changes yourself, make sure you do it right. Pay attention to the size of the circuits, and use only UL-rated lights for safety. All lighting fixtures have a different “draw” – the amount of electricity they use – so make sure you're replacing old lights with new lights of the same wattage.

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