

Fluorescent lamp recycling differentiates distributors

We hear about mercury in our environment more and more these days. Everywhere we look—even in ostensibly “pristine” waterways—scientists are finding mercury in fish.

The track of the contaminant into our diets is a complicated one and has multiple sources. Individual distributors can do something about one of the sources: fluorescent lamp disposal. When dumped or incinerated, fluorescent lamps release mercury.

“It’s not just big chimneys without scrubbers or waste outlets pouring contaminants into streams,” said Terri Goldberg, deputy director of NEWMOA (Northeast Waste Management Officials’ Association), although those are certainly garnering attention. “More and more, it’s the cumulative impacts of our individual actions. While no single lamp is going to have an enormous impact, there are so many millions of them now in use and on the market. Because fluorescent lamps are energy efficient and a viable, excellent choice for building managers, our challenge is to increase awareness, make sustainable choices available, and engage the public in changing habits.”

Partly through the efforts of Goldberg’s organization and others like it (see resource listing), this is already happening. Of note are the New England states—for two years, nearly 50 branches, including those of Granite City, Grainger, and Wesco among others, have joined with licensed hazardous waste handling companies to offer their customers disposal choices for fluorescent lamps.

Think about it—as customer awareness of the problems posed by fluorescent lamp disposal grows (and as more regulations making it illegal to toss a mercury-bearing lamp into the landfill or

incinerator are promulgated), what better value-add might an independent distributor offer than the opportunity for building owners, plant managers, hospital facilities directors, and others to bring their spent lamps back when they’re ready to purchase replacements?

Some distributors have even gone the extra mile to become certified hazardous waste handlers and storage facilities, and will not only replace but pick up old lamps from their customers. Not only is it the ethical thing to do, but it also provides an excellent opportunity to distinguish oneself from the “big box” competition. Several of the NE distributors report receiving orders for new lamps they would not necessarily have obtained unless they were offering the recycling bonus.

Also of note in the effort to reduce mercury pollution is Philips Lighting, who has recently celebrated the production of their billionth low-mercury ALTO lamp. There are similar lamp-awareness and mercury education efforts in the northwestern United States, and resources available for distributors to become more proactive in this unique opportunity to both follow the federal and state waste regulations and offer an unparalleled value-add for your customers.

“In environmental policy, we need to continue to aggressively mandate waste treatment and waste control measures,” said Goldberg. “But if that’s all we do, we’ll simply be playing catch-up. We need to get to the underlying causes and redirect ourselves to a more economically efficient, public-health-conscious, and proactive view. So we want to focus on both ends—the clean-up as well as the generation and handling of the items in the first place. That’s where distributors can really contribute.” ■■■

Learn more:

NEWMOA www.newmoa.org

617-367-8558

- Made up of NE state directors of solid waste handling; organized in 1986
- Networks recycling businesses with those needing the services
- Develops model legislation for hazardous waste guidelines
- Helps with training for meeting guidelines
- Public educational efforts

PPRC (Pacific Northwest Pollution Prevention Resource Center)

www.pprc.org

206-352-2050

- Non-profit working collaboratively with business, government, and other sectors to promote environmental protection through pollution prevention (P2)
- Formed in 1990; today is leading effort to educate hospitals, lighting contractors, and commercial property managers about proper disposal of spent lamps
- Helps create marketplace incentives for recycling efforts
- Partners with other pollution prevention efforts across the United States to share and exchange info

ALMR (Association of Lighting and Mercury Recyclers) www.almr.org

707-942-2197

- Established in 1999 to represent members of the mercury recycling industry
- Educates business, government, and civic leaders about mercury handling and source issues
- On the Web site’s “Welcome” page, at the left is a downloadable PDF called “State Lamp Recycling Contacts”

Other links:

- www.epa.gov/airprog/oar/mercury/information.htm#questions
- www.epa.gov/grtlakes/p2/mercpam.html

Chichester is a Virginia-based writer. Reach her at falconer@swva.net.