

Mercury threat from fluorescents prompts call for recycling laws

While the Australian Government's move to phase out incandescent light bulbs in favour of compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) by 2010 has been welcomed as an important initiative against global warming, concern has been raised that discarded fluorescent lights bring a new environmental problem – higher levels of poisonous mercury in landfill.

At the moment, most used fluorescent tubes are dumped in landfill. Australian Council of Recyclers CEO, Anne Prince, says the move to fluorescent lights without corresponding legislation governing their disposal is 'an ecological disaster in the making'.

'It is time for Australia to join the rest of the industrialised world in banning the dumping of fluorescent lights in landfill and introducing a collection system to ensure proper recycling,' she says.

While intact fluorescent tubes and bulbs are safe to handle and use, when broken during disposal, mercury – a known neurotoxin – is released.

Recycling firm, Advanced Recycling Australasia, says all the materials from discarded fluorescent tubes, including glass, aluminium, steel and mercury, can be successfully recycled.

The company's CEO, Doug Rowe, says phasing out incandescent lighting without bringing in proper recycling laws for fluorescents is 'simply swapping one environmental problem for another'.

Professor John Buckeridge, Head of the School of Civil, Environmental and Chemical Engineering at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, says the public health effects of having millions of mercury-contained fluorescent tubes dumped in landfill will be 'disastrous', with



Compact fluorescent light globes beat incandescent globes on energy efficiency, but their mercury content could be a nasty problem unless disposal processes are thought through. GWMullis

possible severe environmental and health costs including mercury poisoning's effects on the nervous systems of both humans and animals.

Long-range climate prediction help for Pacific islands

The Australian Bureau of Meteorology and AusAID have collaborated on a \$3 million, three-year project to help 10 Pacific island countries improve their long-range climate predictions for planning in areas that may be affected by climate shift, such as health and water supply.

The Pacific region comprises 22 small-island developing states and territories, many of which – like Tuvalu – are low-lying atolls with limited land space.

These low-lying islands are already susceptible to cyclones, storm surges, droughts and flooding, and scientists agree that global warming could result in such events happening more frequently and causing some islands to disappear altogether.

The Pacific Islands Climate Prediction Project will involve

the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

Using PC-based climate prediction software, the Bureau of Meteorology will work with their counterparts in regional Pacific meteorological services to improve their confidence in interpreting climate prediction data.

'Staff with the Bureau of Meteorology have been helping their Pacific counterparts to develop their understanding of weather and climate information for many years,' says Greg Hunt, the Federal Government's Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

'Improved weather predictions will allow water resource management agencies and health authorities to prepare for the months ahead using probability based forecasts.



Tuvalu's string of low-lying atolls are already experiencing the impacts of climate-driven sea level rise. Bureau of Meteorology

'Long-range climate prediction will also assist the agricultural, fishing and tourism industries in planning and can help Pacific island countries to prepare for the potential impact of climate change.'

Mr Hunt said that because the work would deepen knowledge of climate and weather in the Pacific, it also had the potential to improve Australia's ability to predict regional climate change.