S.C. Lawmakers Fight For Incandescent Lightbulbs

Jim Davenport, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina lawmakers are taking a stand in favor of states' lights.

With incandescent bulbs being phased out under federal law in favor of energy-efficient compact fluorescents, legislators want to exempt South Carolina from the measure, saying Washington has no business telling the state how to light its closets and countertops.

The proposed state law, called the Incandescent Light Bulb Freedom Act, "allows South Carolina to say to the federal government we are going to exercise our rights," said Republican state Rep. Bill Sandifer, a co-sponsor.

The federal government is phasing out incandescent lights starting with 100-watt bulbs in 2012. In 2014, manufacturers will stop making 75-, 60- and 40-watt bulbs, too, under the 2007 Bush administration law. But the squiggly, energy-efficient fluorescent bulbs have drawn complaints that they are too expensive, put out a dim, sickly light, contain traces of mercury and take too long to reach full brightness.

As early as Tuesday, the South Carolina House will begin debating a bill that would allow companies to manufacture incandescent bulbs in South Carolina as long as they stamp them "Made in South Carolina" and sell them only within the state. Supporters of the bill say the federal government would have no authority to intervene because its power to regulate business extends only to commerce that crosses state lines.

South Carolina has only one, small manufacturer of incandescent bulbs, but the hope is that others will set up shop here, too, if the law passes.

Arizona lawmakers tried the same thing a year ago, passing a bill that would have declared incandescent light bulbs manufactured entirely within the state exempt from federal regulation. But Republican Gov. Jan Brewer vetoed it. Texas, Georgia and Minnesota have also considered clinging to incandescent bulbs, but none has passed a law. California embraced the new federal regulations a year early.

The South Carolina bill is expected to win approval in the House, though its fate is far from certain in the Senate, and Republican Gov. Nikki Haley has not offered her support. Even if it became law, it would probably be challenged in court.

And Randy Barnett, a constitutional law expert at Georgetown University, said the state would probably lose, in part because it wouldn't be able to keep people from

buying incandescent light bulbs in South Carolina and using them in another state.

California lost a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case with a similar underlying legal issue. That dispute involved whether medical marijuana grown in the state is subject to federal laws against pot.

South Carolina lawmakers have a long history of going against the federal government. In the past year they have taken up bills to stall federal health care legislation and create their own currency. Before that, of course, came slavery, states' rights, secession and the Civil War, as well as a century of foot-dragging on segregation, seat belts, drunken driving and the drinking age.

Incandescents, the design basically created by Thomas Edison in the late 1800s, create light by passing electric current through a wire filament. But 90 percent of the electricity is wasted as heat instead of light. Fluorescents burn cooler.

The newer bulbs are more expensive — about $3 for a 25-watt fluorescent versus about $1 for a 100-watt incandescent — but supporters of the new technology say the lights last so much longer that they save money in the long run. An incandescent bulb may burn for 750 to 2,500 hours, while a compact fluorescent can last up to 10,000 hours, according to the Energy Department.

If the South Carolina bill passes, it could boost hiring at American Light Bulb Manufacturing Inc., which has a factory in Mullins, in an impoverished, rural part of the state, president Ray Schlosser said from the company's headquarters in Schaumburg, Ill. The plant is in Marion County, the state's capital for unemployment, with one-fifth of the work force jobless.

"The federal government was just trying to shove this down Americans' throats too quickly," Schlosser said.

Before the 2007 law, he had three production lines with 50 workers making the bulbs. But Schlosser said he is down to a single line with 15 workers and a single U.S. competitor, Sylvania. Most of the incandescent bulb business is now overseas. GE made its last incandescent bulb in the U.S. last fall.

Kit Kennedy, energy counsel with the Natural Resources Defense Council, doesn't expect other states to follow South Carolina's lead.

"Most states, whether they're red states or blue states, are interested in promoting energy efficiency," Kennedy said. "We hope that South Carolina sees the light, as it were."

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