

**ENERGY EFFICIENCY: A climate-fighting idea, or how new light bulbs form over peoples' heads** *(Tuesday, July 8, 2008)*

Saqib Rahim, *ClimateWire* reporter

NEW ORLEANS -- Octavia Curtis, a 66-year-old retired seamstress, says she doesn't know much about energy efficiency, and the words "climate change" hardly get a response from her.

To be sure, she's had distractions. When Hurricane Katrina tried to drown her city in August 2005, she had to flee to Houston. She stayed there for two years, but New Orleans, her birthplace and lifetime home, eventually called her back. Now she rents a home in the western part of the city. A disaster housing program helps her pay rent, but it runs out in March 2009.

So when she is offered a squiggly newfangled light bulb, she worries. "That's too expensive for me to buy," she says, pointing her finger at the bulb accusingly.

But thanks to a Swiss-born musician named Andi Hoffman, she gets them for free. A volunteer counts the number of lights in Curtis' home. One by one, he removes the old incandescent light bulbs from lamps and recessed ceiling lights as Curtis' grandchildren chatter before the flickering TV. Clattering aboard a stepladder, he inserts a spiral-shaped bulb in each empty socket. They are compact fluorescent light bulbs, or CFLs.

His installations complete, the volunteer pulls out a clipboard, and he and Curtis review the total: 38 CFLs. They will save her an estimated \$1,748 over the bulbs' lifetime. And, the volunteer reminds her, she has done something heroic: The changes will mean that Curtis keeps 16,986 pounds of carbon dioxide out of the air.

"Oh, OK, that's a good thing!" says Curtis, brightening up. "Oh, that's good. That's a blessing."

With that, the volunteer pops into a pickup truck and heads back to Green Light New Orleans, a nonprofit founded by Hoffman. The office, tucked into half of Hoffman's home, comfortably fits Green Light's five full-time staff. But the organization's project has the walls bulging with ambition: Hoffman and his crew hope to replace no less than 3 million light bulbs in homes throughout New Orleans.

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A 'Green Light' volunteer screws in a free CFL. Photo by Saqib Rahim.

### **'Green Light' shines while consumers sleep**

Green Light has been plugging in the energy-sipping bulbs since late 2006, funded mainly through corporate donations and grants, but also through carbon offsets it sells to a dealer in Ireland. Low-income New Orleanians, who usually discover Green Light through word of mouth, sign up for a visit to their home. Troops of volunteers -- whether AmeriCorps recruits, members of church groups or power couples -- carry the boxed bulbs there, replacing as many old incandescent light bulbs as they can.

By giving the CFLs away for free, Green Light is dodging the issue that has kept CFLs from making a splash in the country's energy efficiency. While CFLs are poised to take a big bite out of emissions from electricity generation -- the country's No. 1 emitter, if you don't break it down by sector -- consumers haven't jumped on board. The chief barrier has been called "sticker shock": While CFLs pay for themselves through energy savings in just a few years, they cost three to 10 times more than comparable incandescents off the shelf.

But Hoffman hopes the no-strings, no-cost approach may be just enough to turn people on to energy savings in a city that received a grotesque preview of what global warming could bring.

Scientists remain unwilling to draw a strong link between climate change and the hurricane: They say only that climate change helped set the warmer-water conditions that feed stronger storms.

But for Hoffman, the storm was a dreadful wakeup call that it was time to do something about global warming.

It was hardly a rock-star departure for Hoffman when he left Bern, Switzerland, in 1993. He was 32 and married, with a 2-year-old child. His roots-rock act, Andi Hoffman and B-Goes, enjoyed a steady following throughout Europe. But Hoffman found himself tiring of Switzerland's supremely organized, efficient society. He wanted to see something else -- someplace English-speaking, and someplace warm.

### **A Swiss musician gets juiced up over a Buick and the Big Easy**

His family landed in Orlando with nothing but two backpacks and a plan to drive to San Francisco. It was the high-flying '90s, when gas prices hovered above a dollar, and Hoffman paid \$2,000 for a Buick Century station wagon, the biggest, most American car he could find. They rolled through Jacksonville, Fla.; Mobile, Ala.; and a few beach towns, never spending more than a few days, to see if each one could grow on them.

But New Orleans' passionate culture and its gritty, Southern feel, Hoffman said, instantly captivated him. "It was 180 degrees different to Switzerland," he said. His family settled into a shotgun-style house in the Carrollton neighborhood, just a few blocks from his current home. He gradually applied for U.S. citizenship and lined up rock shows around the country.

Fifteen years later, his eyes were fixed to the television as Hurricane Katrina menaced the Gulf Coast. It was the wee hours of Sunday morning, and the skies looked completely calm. But Hoffman, sensing that the storm would be worse than advertised, woke his family and told them to get packed.

They crawled through crowded streets out of the city, headed for Lafayette, La. The next day, the levees would break, allowing Lake Pontchartrain to envelop 80 percent of the city.

Hoffman spent six months in Santa Fe, N.M., before returning to his New Orleans home. He had been lucky -- outside of some roof damage, it was relatively intact. The flooding and wind meant he had a fair bit of cleaning up to do in the house. But Hoffman went to the store and grabbed \$120 worth of energy-efficient light bulbs.

"It was definitely for me a wakeup call in terms of global warming," he said. "I started to wonder, why did I wait so long? I knew about CFL light bulbs, knew about the technology, it wasn't new to me at all." But when a light bulb would burn out, he would just "go out and buy the cheapest light bulb I can find -- that's a habit."

## **Mixing rock and Swiss efficiency into the gumbo**

The storm stirred something else in him, too -- memories of Switzerland, where recycling was free and conservation was a society-wide mindset. Now, in his new home, it was time to remember that ethic. "The city's broken -- I've got to do something," he remembers thinking.

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Andi Hoffman. Photo by Saqib Rahim.

The first step was offsetting the B-Goes' travel emissions. With Hoffman's band back on tour in October 2006, fans got a surprise question with their ticket: Would they be willing to donate to the effort? Hoffman offered to buy energy-efficient light bulbs that he would install at fans' houses himself. By the end of 2006, he had fully outfitted 10 homes.

Word got out, and Hoffman found himself making more house visits. He recalls installing as many as 7,000 light bulbs in the first half of 2007. By late 2007, he was riding high on a \$50,000 joint donation from Coca-Cola and the New Orleans Saints, which translated to another 20,000 light bulbs.

By that point, the bulb boom had done more than offset the B-Goes' carbon footprint; it had outrun the ability of Hoffman's one-man show to handle. He hired staffers to man the ship -- dubbed Green Light New Orleans -- and began selling carbon offsets to EcoSecurities, a carbon-credit trader based in Dublin, Ireland.

Green Light's success has put his music on hold, though. Hoffman's extracurricular project is a full-time job now, as he races to protect funding, keep bulbs in stock and organize home visits. A recent attempt to win support from Mayor Ray Nagin fell flat, but Green Light may get a boost from a recently passed municipal energy conservation program that will make loans for home-efficiency improvements.

But has Hoffman solved the mystery of the little light bulb that couldn't?

In 2007, 290 million CFL light bulbs came off the shelf, twice as many as in 2006. But they accounted for only 20 percent of light bulb sales nationwide.

### **'Sticker shock' melts in the glare of free bulbs**

It is not that the bulbs are hard to find, or that the \$1.50 average price tag breaks the piggy bank. Experts remain perplexed as to why CFLs still cause "sticker shock" even though they can pay for themselves within a year. The usual suspects: Consumers lack information about CFLs and energy savings in general; CFLs sometimes cast harsh or discolored light; they take longer to turn on; or they pose a mercury risk ([ClimateWire](#), June 6).

Green Light client Chris Lieteau distrusts the motives behind the push for CFLs. "I think it's just a scam for energy [companies] to make more money to keep the bills high," he says. "But we'll see when the next bill comes."

Technology advances over the past two decades, as well as rising energy costs and awareness of global warming, have dampened these concerns and boosted CFL sales. In 2007, Congress also passed laws that will phase out all incandescents, and phase in even more-efficient light bulbs, by 2020.

But Hoffman's success in New Orleans suggests that the fastest way to spread energy-efficient light bulbs is not to make them market-competitive, but to give them away altogether.

Hoffman says his clients are almost all low-income New Orleanians, many of whom have only recently returned to the city. Many are still too worried about work, health and family safety to shell out a few extra dollars for low-energy light bulbs.

But when cash-strapped families hear about the potential dollar savings, Hoffman said, that is when his phone rings. He sends a volunteer team to their house. And more often than not, he says, the family changes its energy habits for good.

An informal Green Light survey of 150 clients found that 96 percent of them planned on CFL replacements in the future. And among those who had unusual light bulbs that Green Light could not replace, 69 percent said they had bought CFLs of their own.

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