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Energy Department Lags in Saving Energy

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON — Like flossing or losing weight, saving energy is easier to promise than to actually do — even if you are the Department of Energy.

Its Web site advises that choosing new lighting technologies can slash energy use by 50 to 75 percent. But the department is having trouble taking its own advice, according to an internal audit released on Wednesday; many of its offices are still installing obsolete fluorescent bulbs.

And very few have switched to the most promising technology, light-emitting diodes, which the department spent millions of dollars to help commercialize.

Many of the changes would generate savings that would pay back the investment in two years or so, according to the report, by the department's inspector general.

In one case, the Department of Energy made most of the investment by installing timers to shut off lights at night when it moved into a new building in 1997. But it got no benefit: as of March of this year, it had not bought the central control unit needed to run the system.

"We are requesting people in the federal sector and the private sector to do the cost-benefit analysis and make the investment," Gregory H. Friedman, the inspector general, said in a telephone interview. "We should do it ourselves."

Asked about the report, a spokeswoman for the Energy Department, Stephanie Mueller, said, "We can acknowledge there's more work that needs to be done."

The problem is not ignorance, the report suggests. For example, the department helped develop a technology called spectrally enhanced lighting that gives off light at wavelengths that mimic the sun. Officials at the Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago told the auditors that that they could reduce energy consumption by 50 percent by switching to the new technology from old fluorescents.

But of seven sites, with 96 buildings in all, that the auditors visited, only two used the enhanced lighting. In many cases buildings were using fluorescents introduced 40 years ago.

Energy Department offices gave a variety of explanations for why they were unable to update their lighting. Some said the lights were in high-security areas. And in some cases, the lighting that needs replacing is on very high ceilings and hard to get to, auditors were told.

In February 2008, the department adopted a new policy for taking its savings from energy conservation and reinvesting them in new conservation measures. But the auditors found that "there was no departmentwide system in place to track or calculate reinvestments of energy savings."

Of the seven sites visited, only one had a system in place for even identifying the savings, the auditors said.

Nationally, the department has 9,000 buildings and a huge electric bill, $190 million a year, of which about $76 million goes to lighting, the report said. The auditors said more efficient lighting would save American taxpayers $2.2 million a year and free up enough electricity to meet the needs of 3,200 homes.

Ms. Mueller said the department's headquarters, the Forrestal Building, which sits a few blocks west of the Capitol and near the Smithsonian's "castle" building, would soon become a showcase for lighting innovation.

Its 600 outdoor lights will be replaced with light-emitting diodes, she said, saving 475 megawatt-hours a year. A typical house uses about 12 megawatt-hours a year.