Media release

From the Minister for Energy and Resources

Thursday, 11 December, 2008

UNSAFE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS DETECTED IN MELBOURNE STORES

Energy and Resources Minister Peter Batchelor today joined with Victoria’s energy safety regulator and fire authorities to warn the community not to put their family in danger by buying cheap decorative Christmas lighting products that do not meet Australian safety standards.

Mr Batchelor said the warning followed the discovery of Christmas lights with exposed live parts for sale in Melbourne stores.

“Unapproved lights can be dangerous with the potential to start fires in homes and give people electric shocks," Mr Batchelor said.

“Audits of some ‘bargain’ stores by Energy Safe Victoria (ESV) compliance officers over recent weeks have detected a number of non-compliant imported Christmas light products.

“Of particular concern are non-compliant controllers provided with lighting sets. ESV has detected evidence of overheating in units, along with exposed ‘live’ parts and inadequate insulation.

“Christmas can be an expensive time for families, but you should never be tempted to buy cheap or second-hand lights at markets and bargain stores that are not approved for use in Australia.

“Christmas tree lights and other electrical products are only approved for sale in Australia once they have been exposed to rigorous testing by accredited test agencies.”

Mr Batchelor said ESV had served ‘stop sales’ notices to some retailers following the audits and if people were aware of unapproved products for sale they should immediately contact Energy Safe Victoria on 9203 9700 or 1800 800 158.

“Outlets selling unapproved electrical products face hefty fines of up to $4000 for individuals and $21,000 for companies,” Mr Batchelor said.

Mr Batchelor said Energy Safe Victoria, the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA) were also warning the community to take extreme care when installing and using Christmas tree lights or other decorative lights over the festive season.

“Christmas should be a time to celebrate, so don’t turn it into a tragedy through fires or injuries as a result of incorrectly using defective Christmas lights," Mr Batchelor said.

Mr Batchelor said hazards associated with unapproved Christmas lighting products include:

- Dangerously thin electrical insulation on the flexible leads;
- Incorrectly rated globes that may overheat and cause surrounding materials to catch fire;
- Inadequately attached cords that may pull out of lamp holders;
- Light sets designed for (overseas) voltages less than 230 Volts (normal supply voltage in Australia is currently 240 Volts);
- Plugs incompatible with Australian power points;

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ESV and Victorian fire authorities provide the following advice when purchasing Christmas lights:

- Always ensure Christmas lighting products have been approved for use in Australia;
- Check for a compliance number on the product. If in doubt seek the advice of the store manager or do not purchase the product until satisfied that it is safe and complies with Australia’s strict electricity safety requirements.

In addition, advice for the safe operation of Christmas lights includes:

- Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions regarding assembly, installation and globe replacement;
- If using the same lights from year to year, make sure they are in good condition and there is no exposed (uninsulated) wiring before installation. Also, make sure they are dismantled and packed away carefully after use;
- Do not use damaged or faulty decorative lights;
- Never use decorative lights outdoors unless they are specifically designed for such use. Similarly make sure extension cords are suitable for outdoor use;
- Do not cover or modify decorative lights;
- Do not overload power sockets;
- Always switch off and unplug decorative lights when unattended or when watering a Christmas tree;
- Observe and monitor the correct operation of your decorative lights when unpacked and initially used;
- In households with infants and young children, consider using extra-low-voltage (less than 50 Volts AC) decorative lights supplied from an approved transformer;
- Ensure you have installed working smoke alarms; and
- Make sure you have a home emergency exit plan and meeting place agreed in the event of a fire.

Not for publication

Samples of unapproved lighting products can be viewed at ESV’s Southbank office or images can be supplied on request. Please contact ESV Executive Adviser Communications and Public Relations David Guthrie-Jones on 9203 9744.