

Pardon the interruption

State ponders high-priced electrical units for safety

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The state is considering mandating a new electrical device that would trip a circuit if an arc jumps between two frayed cords, as shown in this graphic.

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break the electrical circuit on an outlet if they detect an electrical arc jumping between frayed cords or sparking when an appliance is unplugged before it's turned off. They can be installed at each individual electrical socket or in a building's circuit-breaker box.

The National Fire Protection Association mandated the interrupters in its codes in 2002, but this is the first year the Wisconsin Department of Commerce recommended the state adopt the requirement. The technology has improved over the years, and there are more companies making the product, said Bob DuPont, director of program development for the state Safety & Buildings Division.

The state's Electrical Code Advisory Council, which is composed of representatives from the construction industry, will meet on Jan. 3 to consider whether next year's state code amendments should include an interrupter mandate.

Chris Kelliher knows how hard it is selling clients a \$15 product they're not familiar with instead of the 50-cent item they've known for years.

That's the concern of Spring City Electric Inc.'s sales and marketing manager as the state considers amending state building codes to require installation in homes of arc-fault circuit interrupters, which offer more fire protection than a 50-cent socket. When given the option, Kelliher said, most clients of Waukesha-based Spring City choose to pay more for a dimmer switch than an interrupter.

"I have mixed emotions because unless the actual public understands it, they think it's just another way for contractors to jab them," Kelliher said. "People are very cost-conscious, and it's no different with people paying for a house."

The interrupters automatically

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Chris Kelliher

Electrical interrupters increase safety

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Kelliher said only about 5 percent of his customers choose to install the interrupters. They can cost \$15 or \$20 each if bought in quantities of less than 20, but Silver City gets them for \$12 apiece by buying in bulk.

The mandate has been a point of discussion for a few years, and Kelliher said it started as a response to apartment fires that were started by electrical arcs.

"What initially drove this was unit heaters in the bedrooms," he said. "The main issue is always with apartment buildings in Milwaukee where the fires that have started have been in somebody's bedroom where there was a heater plugged in."

When the state's code council considered the mandate last year, one concern was the limited number of companies manufacturing the interrupters, said Dick Lynes, vice president of operations for McGrath Electric and the Associated

Builders and Contractors of Wisconsin's representative on the code council.

"It would've locked the electrical contractors and the homeowners into a few specific products," he said.

Zeppos & Associates, which the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, hired to help spread the word on interrupters, said there are four companies that manufacture the product: Milwaukee-based Eaton Corp., General Electric, Siemens and Square D, a brand of Schneider Electric, based in Paris.

NEMA will keep tabs on Wisconsin's code process to support the inclusion of the interrupter requirement, said Jeffrey Fecteau, Midwest representative for NEMA. The group is starting a national campaign in conjunction with the International Code Council to promote building safety, and the campaign will include information about the interrupters.

"The technology is there as a saver of

property," Fecteau said. "It's not a manufacturer trying to raise their profit margin."

Lynes said nuisance trips, where the circuit is broken for an unexplained reason, are a problem with the interrupters.

"That does happen, and that was an issue before," he said. "I think the technology has improved since then."

Fecteau said NEMA set up a hotline for people to call if they experience a nuisance trip. Investigations of those complaints show that, in every case, there was another problem in the building that caused the trip, and it wasn't because of a faulty interrupter, he said.

DuPont said the Electrical Code Advisory Council will issue a decision on the interrupters by March, and the state will hold public hearings in March or April.

To become state law, the state Legislature also would have to approve the requirement.