Hawaii: Tax increase targets smokeless products

TREENA SHAPIRO - Associated Press - Associated Press

A loophole in Hawaii's tobacco tax law makes smokeless tobacco products and "little cigars" cost-friendlier alternatives to cigarettes.

As a result, increased tobacco taxes only impact smoking rates, but have not led to any significant decreases in the use of chewing tobacco, snuff and tobacco sticks and pellets.

A bill headed to the Senate floor could change that.

State Sen. David Ige, chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, said on Friday that a proposal to raise the excise tax on all tobacco products to 70 percent or $3.20 each, would close the loophole.

Senate Bill 2422 would also ensure that the little cigars, which are often flavored, are taxed at the same rate as the cigarettes they resemble, said Ige, D-Aiea-Pearl City.

The bill would also raise the cost of "roll your own" tobacco.

Health Department statistics on the cigarette tax indicate that for every 10 percent increase on price, there is a 3 to 4 percent decrease in consumption — 6 to 8 percent for youth.

The Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawaii gave the measure strong support, pointing out that it would have the most impact on new tobacco users.

"Adolescents and young adults are two to three times more sensitive to tobacco price changes than adults — when price increases, less youth will begin to start using smokeless tobacco and other tobacco products and more will reduce their consumption," noted the Coalition's Executive Director Deborah Zysman, in testimony to the committee.

According to Zysman, smokeless tobacco is linked to cancers of the esophagus, pharynx, larynx, stomach and pancreas. It also contributes to gum and cardiovascular diseases.

The American Heart Association offered the committee information about nicotine, which causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and flow of blood from the heart. "Users of smokeless tobacco are exposed to levels of nicotine that are comparable to cigarette smokers," said government relations and Mission:Lifeline Director Donald Weisman.

Products like little cigars and roll-your-own tobacco lead to the same health

problems and diseases as cigarette smoking, he added.

The state Department of Health weighed in at another committee hearing on Feb. 13.

Health Director Loretty Fuddy said smoking and tobacco use are Hawaii and the nation's leading cause of preventable death and illness, resulting in more than 1,100 resident deaths each year, and costing more than $640 million in health care and lost productivity.

"Tobacco products not (Food and Drug Administration) approved to help smokers quit are addictive and dangerous whether smoked, chewed or dissolved," she said.

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