

EU crackdown on tobacco stops short of plain packets (Update)

December 19 2012, by Claire Rosenberg

With menthol cigarettes to be banned and cigarette packs sold with repulsive images of rotting lungs, the European Union released new anti-tobacco proposals Wednesday, the first in over a decade.

"Tobacco kills half of its users and is highly addictive," said EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg, himself a former smoker. "We're not forbidding smoking, we're aiming to make it less attractive.

Almost 700,000 Europeans die from tobacco-related illnesses each year, equal to the population of Frankfurt or Palermo, and Borg hopes to cut the bloc's 27 percent of smokers by two percentage points in five years.

With the habit most often acquired before the age of 25, the proposed legislation particularly targets the young—hence a ban on flavoured cigarettes, roll-your-own, or smokeless tobacco products.

"Tobacco products should look and taste like tobacco products," said Borg, adding that flavours such as menthol, chocolate or vanilla were often popular with young people.

"This proposal ensures that attractive packaging and flavourings are not used as a marketing strategy."

On packaging, images of camels along with other well-known cigarette logos will be gone in three to four years, the time it will take the 27 EU states and the European parliament to approve the package of new rules.

They will notably force tobacco companies to cover 75 percent of packets back and front with graphic health warnings and gruesome pictures of diseased body parts.

The size of packs will be standardised and boxes of 10 banned "to ensure the full visibility of pictorial warnings".

But the proposals fall short of demands by many health campaigners for a total ban on company branding and logos on packets, along the lines of the plain packaging enforced this month in Australia.

Should Australia win an appeal currently at the World Trade Organization against its plain packets, "it will open the way for others to follow suit," said Borg. The proposals state that "member states remain free to introduce plain packaging in duly justified cases."

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), a network of groups, welcomed the proposal but regretted that "it fails to propose mandatory plain packaging", which is seen as a key to prevent youngsters from lighting up their first cigarette.

The group also asked whether this was "the beginning of the end of tobacco-industry led policy-making?"

This referred to a scandal over the EU's Tobacco Products Directive just a few weeks ago that involved a shady Maltese lobbyist, Sweden's substitute for snuff, and robberies against anti-smoking groups.

Borg's predecessor John Dalli was forced to resign after the EU fraud office OLAF said a Maltese entrepreneur used his contacts with the commissioner to seek a bribe from a Swedish firm in return for changes to the tobacco legislation, "in particular on the EU export ban on snus".

Snus, or Swedish snuff, is a moist powder tobacco originating from dry snuff. Though its sale is illegal across the EU, it is manufactured and chewed in Sweden, which has an exemption.

Borg's new proposals maintain the ban on snus as well as Sweden's exemption.

They also ban "slims" and state that electronic cigarettes, which contain some nicotine, will only be authorised as medicinal products.

Pipes and cigars however were largely left out of the loop.

"They are on the decline and don't attract youths," Borg said.

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