

EU Parliament clears tough new anti-smoking rules (Update 2)

October 8 2013, by Angela Charlton

European lawmakers approved sweeping new regulations governing the multibillion-dollar tobacco market on Tuesday, including bigger drastic health warnings on cigarette packs and a ban on menthol and other flavorings to further curb smoking. They stopped short, however, of tough limits on electronic cigarettes.

The European Parliament vote in Strasbourg came after months of bitter debate and an unusually strong lobbying campaign by the tobacco industry, which decries the regulations as disproportionate and limiting consumer freedom. The Parliament dismissed many of the industry's arguments, agreeing on a slightly watered-down version of the proposed legislation.

The lawmakers voted to impose warning labels—with the inclusion of gruesome pictorials, for example showing cancer-infested lungs—covering 65 percent of cigarette packs and to be shown above the brand logo. Current warning labels cover only 30-40 percent of packages.

The legislature still must reach a compromise with the 28 European Union governments on certain points before the rules can enter into force. Diplomats say a deal could be struck by the end of the year.

The new rules were viewed by the World Health Organization and EU health officials as an important milestone—but not the end of their quest to stop people from smoking and keep teens from ever picking up a

cigarette.

Smoking bans in public, limits on tobacco firms' advertising, and other measures over the past decade have seen the number of smokers fall from an estimated 40 percent of the EU's 500 million citizens to 28 percent now. Still, treatment of smoke-related diseases costs about 25 billion euros (\$34 billion) a year, and the bloc estimates there are around 700,000 smoking-related deaths per annum across the 28-nation bloc.

Legislators also voted for new limits on advertising for electronic cigarettes, but rejected a measure that would have restricted them to medical use only. The battery-operated products, which are enjoying a boom in the United States and many European countries, turn nicotine into a vapor inhaled by the user and are often marketed as a less harmful alternative to tobacco. Many health experts say e-cigarettes are useful for people trying to quit or cut down on nicotine.

Armando Peruga, a tobacco control expert at WHO in Geneva, said regulating e-cigarettes wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing and that WHO is currently evaluating their safety and effectiveness. "We do think e-cigarettes could be useful, but we need more information. We have not yet ruled them out. We do think they could be helpful for some smokers."

Linda McAvan, a member of the European Parliament and Britain's opposition Labour Party, said she expects tougher rules on electronic cigarettes down the line, saying that most EU governments want them. "We want to make sure they aren't marketed as gateway products for young people."

The European Parliament also voted to ban additives and flavorings like chocolate or vanilla, starting three years after the legislation will come into force, and five years later for menthol, possibly in 2022. Opponents

argued fruity or other pleasant aromas entice novices to smoke. Lawmakers also banned small packages said to entice young smokers, but rejected a ban on slim cigarettes popular with women.

"We are not telling Europeans what to do, but we don't want the industry to mislead the young," McAvan stressed. "We want tobacco products that look and taste like tobacco. There won't be any more lipstick- or perfume-style cigarettes packets," she added.

Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland wrote a fervent appeal to lawmakers on Monday, saying: "Every year, more Europeans die from smoking than from the combined total of car accidents, fires, heroin, cocaine, murder and suicide."

Lobbying against the measure was led by Philip Morris International Inc., which owns several brands such as Marlboro and said the new legislation was "deeply flawed." It condemned what it called "oversized graphic health warnings and pack standardization."

The vote "failed to take into account the views of millions of EU citizens, including our employees, retailers, tobacco growers and adult consumers who will be impacted by these measures," the company said in a statement.

Philip Morris, with \$8.5 billion of sales and 12,500 employees in Europe, has also claimed the regulation could result in up to 175,000 job losses and lost tax revenues of 5 billion euros (\$6.8 billion) per year.

Leftists broadly favored the new regulations, joined by many conservatives concerned about the costs to national health care systems of smoking-related treatment. The package was adopted in a 560-92 vote with 32 abstentions.

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