

Legislation would raise smoking age in California from 18 to 21

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A woman lights up a cigarette at a garden in Costa Mesa. (Karen Tapia-Andersen / Los Angeles Times)

Lawmaker introduces bill to raise smoking age in California from 18 to 21

Alarmed by the prevalence of tobacco use among teenagers, state Sen. Ed Hernandez (D-West Covina) introduced legislation Thursday that would raise the legal minimum smoking age in California from 18 to 21.

Hernandez, who is an optometrist, has support for the bill from health groups including the California Medical Assn., the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Assn., but the legislation is likely to face strong opposition from the tobacco industry.

“Tobacco companies know that people are more likely to become addicted to smoking if they start at a young age,” Hernandez said in a statement. “We can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines while Big Tobacco markets to our kids and gets another generation of young people hooked on a product that will ultimately kill them.”

Smoking contributes to the deaths of more than 40,000 Californians each year, according to Kimberly Amazeen, vice president for the American Lung Assn. in California. She said 21,300 California kids start smoking each year.

“That is why we need to take bold steps forward in our efforts to reduce tobacco use among youth,” Amazeen said in supporting SB 151.

Luther Cobb, MD, president of the California Medical Assn., said his organization believes “that increasing the age at which people can purchase tobacco from 18 to 21 will help reduce tobacco use in young people, hence reducing the

number of preventable diseases.”

The proposal was denounced by Robert Best, western regional representative of The Smoker's Club, a smokers' rights group.

“It's funny that the politicians in Sacramento have nothing better to do with their time than continually attack smokers as a minority,” said Best, a Ventura resident. He said many people start smoking before they are 18 and adding another law would not change that behavior. If anything, Best said, the state should lower the drinking age from 21 to 18.

“When you are 18 you are an adult and you get to do what you want,” he said.

Giant tobacco firm Altria generally opposes any effort by states to change the minimum smoking age now, noting that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is conducting a study through the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on the public health implications of raising the minimum age and is scheduled to report its findings to Congress this year.

“We believe states and localities should defer to this regulatory process and give the FDA, the IOM and others the time to review the science and evidence, before enacting different minimum age laws,” said David Sutton, a spokesman for Altria. “That being said, we review each legislative proposal on its own merits and we will do so on this new piece of legislation.”

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