

Here's how to smoke out the Marlboro Man

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The people who bring you Marlboro and Camel cigarettes didn't agree to quit marketing to teenagers and supply the states with billions of dollars out of the goodness of their hearts.

The lawsuits Idaho and its sister states brought against Big Tobacco a quarter-century ago were an existential threat to the industry.

So the cigarette manufacturers signed a Master Settlement Agreement that curtailed advertising and delivered a steady stream of billions of dollars to the states which was meant to offset cigarette smoking's costs to the public health budget.

Each year, Idaho receives about \$23 million to \$25 million.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence wrote Sunday, settlement looked like "the stone that took down Goliath.

"Then Goliath got back up."

Over the years, Big Tobacco exercised its option to withhold about \$9 billion nationwide on the grounds that states were not tough enough on cigarette companies that were not part of the MSA. Idaho's share of that total comes to about \$33 million - covering the period going back to 2004.

The year before that, Idaho successfully entered arbitration and got its money - plus interest. But the state was out \$250,000 in expenses plus hundreds of thousands worth of hours put in by the state's attorney general's office.

Whatever money goes toward health care or smoking cessation, it hasn't been enough to compensate Idaho's health care costs due to smoking.

And the agreement hasn't done enough stop the industry from recruiting new customers from the ranks of Idaho's youth.

Do you get the sense Big Tobacco doesn't take Idaho seriously?

Want to get the industry's attention?

Raise Idaho's paltry cigarette tax.

At present, the state's 57-cents-per-pack cigarette tax is 43rd lowest in the country and \$1.03 below the national average.

No state west of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon

line charges less.

Among Idaho's neighbors:

- Washington taxes cigarettes at \$3.025 a pack.
- Nevada imposes a \$1.80-a-pack tax.
- Utah and Montana set their rate at \$1.70.
- Oregon's tax is \$1.32 a pack.
- Even oil and gas-rich Wyoming charges a 60-cents-per-pack tax.

Last year, Idaho collected about \$36 million from its cigarette taxes. If you double the tax, Idaho would collect in one year what Big Tobacco has been withholding during the preceding dozen years.

Better yet, raising the tax hits cigarette companies where they live - with young customers. When states raise cigarette taxes, fewer people smoke. Washington's smoking rate is 41 percent lower than West Virginia's because the Evergreen State's cigarette taxes are 4.5 times higher.

Raise Idaho's cigarette tax even higher - by \$1.50 a pack - and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids predicts Idaho would see a 21.1 percent drop in young smokers. The Campaign says that translates into 13,300 Idaho children who would be presumably priced out of taking up the habit and another 12,500 adults whose crimped wallets would lead them to quit as well.

Lawmakers last refused to follow former House Revenue and Taxation Committee Chairman Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, on this point four years ago. Presumably, they're hung up on the idea that any tax - even one meant to stop people from using a deadly product - is a violation of their no-new-taxes mantra.

OK. Then why not use a higher cigarette tax revenues to offset a tax cut elsewhere?

If the net result brings a drop in cigarette sales and with it spending on smoking-related illnesses, Idaho still would be ahead.

Because here's the basic truth: Big Tobacco would miss Idaho's market long before Idaho would miss cheap cigarettes. - M.T.