

Idaho is raising a batch of new smokers

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If you're in the business of luring young people into a lifetime of tobacco addiction, here's some good news: Idaho is open for business.

So say the latest findings of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

At 57 cents a pack, Idaho has the ninth lowest tobacco tax in the United States. No state outside the Deep South is any lower. By contrast, Washington adds \$3.025 to the price of every pack. Montana and Utah charge \$1.70 a pack. In Oregon, the tax is \$1.18. Nevada imposes 80 cents a pack and Wyoming's tax is 60 cents.

Adds the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Idaho makes only a modest effort to discourage smoking. The state devotes \$2.2 million of the \$77.3 million tobacco companies forward to it under the 1998 legal settlement states reached with the industry. That puts Idaho 26th among the states - better than Washington and Nevada, but behind Oregon, Utah, Montana and Wyoming.

To do a proper job, the Centers on Disease Control suggest Idaho should be spending \$16.9 million.

As a result, teen smoking rates in Idaho have plateaued at about 14.3 percent. Each day, 900 Idaho teenagers take up the cigarette habit.

Not bad for those who earn a good living manufacturing and distributing Marlboros and Camels.

Of course, you end up paying for it.

Your taxes cover \$83 million in Medicaid spending that goes toward treating tobacco-related illnesses.

And the \$319 million that Idaho's health care system devotes to tobacco-related ailments is driving up your insurance premiums.

If you're betting Idaho's conservative leaders would leap at the chance to do something about this, you'd lose.

Three years ago, former Rep. Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot - then chairman of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee - proposed adding \$1.25 a pack. Backing him were 30 anti-smoking groups, including the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

Since each 10 percent spike in the price reduces youth smoking by 7 percent, Lake's tax plan would have reduced Idaho's youth smoking rate by 16 percent.

At the very least, some of the \$50 million tax hike could have augmented Idaho's meager smoking cessation program - with huge dividends. When Washington embarked on a smoking cessation program in the late 1990s, it was credited with preventing 13,000 premature deaths and nearly 36,000 hospitalizations - saving \$1.5 billion in health care - each year. For every dollar spent, the program returned \$5.

In other words, were Idaho to meet the CDC target, its smoking cessation efforts might save \$73.5 million in health care costs.

But Lake and the coalition confronted a political force more influential than even the tobacco lobby - anti-tax zealots. Among its adherents are Reps. Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale, and Mike Moyle, R-Star.

Lake's allies accused Denney, then House speaker - and now a candidate for Idaho secretary of state - and Moyle, the House majority leader, of stopping the bill cold.

Lake couldn't get his own committee to even print his own bill.

After the House Democratic minority staged a three-day protest by slowing down the legislative machinery, the issue disappeared, never to be seen again.

When all you hear these days is Republican concerns about rising health care costs - which fuels their reluctance to implement expansion of Medicaid to Idaho's working poor adults - doesn't that seem strange?

Idaho Republicans aren't in bed with the tobacco industry. But as long as they continue to believe no tax - not even one that saves lives - is a good tax, they might as well be. - M.T.