

CHL Audio Report Transcript 03-11-15

New Bill Plays Hardball With Soft Drinks

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Publication: *California Healthline*
Date Posted: March 11, 2015

With California battling an epidemic of obesity and diabetes, public health advocates have put sodas and other sugary drinks in the bulls-eye.

This is a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Kenny Goldberg.

Cheryl Moder directs the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative. She says more than one out of three California children are overweight or obese. Moder believes soft drinks are a big part of the problem.

(Moder): "In San Diego County, for example, 61% of children ages 12 to 17 consume at least one sugar-sweetened beverage each day."

A study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found sugary drinks are the largest source of added sugar in the American diet.

Moder says these beverages are unhealthy.

(Moder): "When you consider that a single 20-ounce bottle of soda contains 16 teaspoons of sugar and about 240 calories that are completely devoid of any nutrition, this makes sodas nothing more than a sugar delivery system that is extremely harmful to our health, particularly to the health of children and adolescents."

Public health advocates have long supported the idea of putting a special tax on sugary drinks.

Mexico did so in 2014. Last fall, Berkeley became the first city in the U.S. to pass such a tax. The one-cent-per-ounce soda tax took effect Jan. 1.

Harold Goldstein is executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

He concedes that Berkeley is one of the most liberal cities in the country. Nonetheless, Goldstein says other places have adopted public policies that the city pioneered.

(Goldstein): "They were the first city to have curb cuts so that people with wheelchairs could go on sidewalks. The free-speech movement started in Berkeley. Some of the most progressive tobacco legislation"

started in Berkeley and then spread all over the country."

Goldstein hopes California lawmakers could start a trend of their own. His group is sponsoring a bill in the Legislature that targets sodas, energy drinks and sports drinks in a different way.

It would require sweetened drinks to carry labels warning that drinking beverages with added sugar contributes to obesity, diabetes and tooth decay.

After heavy lobbying by the beverage industry, a similar measure fizzled out last year in the state Legislature. But Goldstein points out it took six years for a soft drink ban in public schools to pass in the '90s.

(Goldstein): "I think we have a much better chance this year, because a lot more people know about it. It's just a matter of time."

Not surprisingly, the beverage industry is dead set against warning labels, or any other legislation that singles out their products.

CalBev is the trade group for California's beverage companies. Spokesperson Roger Salazar says their products already have labels that list the ingredients and number of calories for each serving.

He says sodas aren't marketed as health food.

(Salazar): "These are beverages that people are designed to consume occasionally as something to satisfy them, to reward them, to quench their thirst. They're not designed to be the main staples of diets."

Salazar says California lawmakers need to think carefully about penalizing snack foods. After all, he argues, consumers should be allowed to make their own choices.

(Salazar): "Do you start banning breads, which some people say have too many carbohydrates or bad carbohydrates? Do you start banning pastas, do you start banning cheeseburgers? You know, where does that stop?"

In an effort to advance and highlight the science about sugar and its effects on health, UC-San Francisco launched the Sugar Science Initiative in 2014. It's a collaboration between UCSF, UC-Davis, and Emory University's School of Medicine.

The initiative's lead investigator, Laura Schmidt, says there's ample evidence linking soda consumption to obesity and Type 2 diabetes. But she says

there's another adverse health effect that wasn't even on the radar 10 years ago: nonalcoholic fatty liver disease.

Schmidt says 31% of American adults and 13% of the nation's children have the condition.

And for the minority of them, the condition can be serious.

(Schmidt): "If left unchecked, this condition will lead to cirrhosis of the liver and require liver transplantation."

Schmidt says the main risk factors for nonalcoholic fatty liver disease are heavy sugar consumption and obesity.

(Schmidt): "So if we could just limit consumption of sugary drinks, we would dramatically reduce our sugar consumption."

Researchers say one way to do that is to make these drinks more expensive.

But with the exception of the recent success in Berkeley, soda taxes have been dead on arrival. More than two dozen cities and states have rejected them over the last few years. In fact, San Francisco turned down a soda tax measure on the same day that Berkeley approved one.

The beverage industry spent more than \$7.7 million to defeat the San Francisco measure.

Harold Goldstein acknowledges that convincing lawmakers to buck the industry and support the warning label bill will be tough. But he's confident it will pass. And Goldstein says when it does, California will be out in front on an important health issue.

(Goldstein): "And I can promise you there will be other states around the country that will, as usual, follow California's model."

The warning label bill, carried by state Sen. Bill Monning (D-Carmel), is expected to be heard in committee this month.

This has been a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Kenny Goldberg. Thanks for listening.