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UC Report Says Program to Diminish
Tobacco Use in California Is Fading

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California's tobacco control program used to be a national model. But a new report from UC-San Francisco finds the program's effectiveness has sharply declined.

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

California voters created the state's tobacco control program in 1988, when they approved a 25-cent-per-pack increase in the cigarette tax. Over two-and-a-half decades, that has pumped a total of \$2 billion into a program that produced a series of hard-hitting media campaigns and has helped change social norms in California around smoking.

But a new report points out the big declines in smoking California achieved in the 1990s have leveled off in recent years. In particular, the report said, the attempt to slow the rate of youth smoking in California has lagged far behind the national average.

Stanton Glantz directs UC-San Francisco's Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education.

Glantz says the program has been watered down, in part because of money. In a way, it has been a victim of its own success, because lower cigarette sales means it gets less than 50% of the money it got in its formative years.

(Glantz): "The ability of the state to actively engage the tobacco industry through the state tobacco program has been about cut in half."

Less cash means a much smaller media budget. Advertising on radio and billboards has been eliminated, with a new emphasis placed on social media.

(Glantz): "And so the program that's there is very weak compared to what used to be present in California."

Glantz says the success in decreasing smoking, with the resulting lower tax revenues, have always been part of the plan. Other sources of revenue need to be proposed to replace that declining cigarette tax by state lawmakers, he says -- and they have been.

Over the last seven years, seven bills have been introduced in the California Legislature to raise the tobacco tax.

All of them were rejected.

The UCSF report and anti-smoking advocates both say there's one overriding reason for the legislative failure: the rebirth of tobacco companies as a major player and contributor of cash in California politics.

(Knox): "In fact, essentially tobacco industry influence has tied the California legislature in knots and has prevented us from really having any strong tobacco control legislation passed."

That's Jim Knox, vice president of government relations for the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network.

He says in the last five years alone, the tobacco industry has spent \$63 million on political contributions and lobbying in California -- including a \$55,000 donation to Gov. Jerry Brown's (D) campaign.

Attempts to increase the 87-cents-a-pack cigarette tax at the ballot box in 2006 and 2012 also failed.

When voters approved tobacco tax increase in 1988, California had the nation's highest rate. Today, that has dropped 33rd lowest in the nation. The national average for cigarette taxes is almost twice California's rate.

(Amazeen): "Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, all have higher tobacco taxes than the state of California."

Kimberly Amazeen is vice president of public policy for California's chapter of the American Lung Association.

(Amazeen): "We are known for being progressive, for passing strong and effective public health measures. We've had success over the last couple of decades, but we've really stalled."

The California Department of Public Health operates the tobacco control program.

Officials declined to comment on tape for this story.

But in email responses to written questions, officials say their funding has decreased from a high of \$95 million in 1989 to just \$42 million in 2014. At the same time, the cost of producing anti-tobacco ads has gone up.

They did say the program's reach has diminished but maintain their efforts have been enormously successful in reducing tobacco use.

California's adult smoking rate fell by 51% between 1988 and 2013, state officials say.

With that drop in smoking, lung cancer rates and deaths from heart disease have sharply declined, as well. State officials estimate the tobacco control program has saved more than one million lives.

UC-San Francisco's Glantz says the state has saved money, too, spending a total of \$2 billion to save about \$168 billion in health care costs.

He says that's reason enough to reinvigorate the program -- especially with the revival of political power in California among tobacco companies.

(Glantz): "They're still tremendously aggressive, they're marketing their products as aggressively as they can, they've gotten into the e-cigarette business. And so, in order to avoid losing the progress that we've made, we need to keep the pressure up, and we need to have an adequately funded tobacco control program, where the resources are used aggressively."

Anti-smoking forces say they hope to convince the Legislature to take another stab at raising California's tobacco tax.

If that's unsuccessful, advocates say they'll likely try to place another initiative to increase the tax on a future ballot.

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.