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New tobacco product being test marketed

Health officials critical of Snus product sold locally

By **Mary Wade Burnside**

Times West Virginian

FAIRMONT — A smokeless tobacco product being test marketed in all Sheetz stores, including those in North Central West Virginia, can give a consumer at least as much nicotine as a cigarette and is targeted toward a wider range of tobacco users, including women.

That does not please state anti-smoking officials, who are already worried about smokeless tobacco habits that can begin as young as age 13 or 14, usually in boys. West Virginia has the highest rate of smokeless tobacco consumption in the nation and the third-highest prevalence of cigarette smoking at about 27 percent of the population.

"We do surveying in middle schools as well as high schools, and we know from doing those that there is a percentage of kids smoking or using spit tobacco," said Bruce Adkins, director of the Division for Tobacco Prevention for the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, which runs anti-tobacco campaigns including one called "Quit Spit."

Camel Snus, produced by Winston-Salem, N.C.-based tobacco giant R.J. Reynolds Co., are being marketed as an alternative to cigarettes in a world where smokers are finding the numbers of public places where they legally can light up dwindling.

One Camel Snus, which come in a .6 gram portioned pouch, contains 8.1 mg of nicotine, according to R.J. Reynolds spokesman David Howard. The tea-bag like pouch allows users to hold the product in their mouths and eventually swallow the tobacco juice, which does not require spitting like other chewing tobacco products.

A cigarette can contain around 10 mg of nicotine — although Howard places the figure higher at 15 to 25 mg — according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The number can vary depending on the type and brand of cigarette, plus the smoker does not inhale all the nicotine in a cigarette. The National Institute on Drug Abuse report states that smokers take in 1 to 2 mg of nicotine per cigarette.

The amount of nicotine Howard states that the Camel Snus contain is higher than what West Virginia University researchers found upon having a sample sent to an out-of-state lab for testing.

Robert Anderson, deputy director of the Prevention Research Center at WVU's Department of Community Medicine, said testing found that the Camel Snus contained 5 mg of nicotine per gram.

"That's quite a lot of nicotine," Anderson said. "That's very potent. That's similar to a snuff product."

The product that WVU had tested actually came from an older version of the Camel Snus that came in .4 gram sizes.

Snus products originated in Sweden and have been popular in Europe. They are newer in the United States.

Camel Snus were first introduced in April 2006 in test markets that included Austin, Texas, and Portland, Ore., Howard said. In 2007, R.J. Reynolds expanded those test markets to Kansas City, Mo.; Indianapolis; Columbus, Ohio; Raleigh, N.C.; Orlando, Fla.; and the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

At that time, the company also forged an agreement with Altoona, Pa.-based convenience store Sheetz to have the

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products placed in all the chains, which can be found in Morgantown, Bridgeport, Weston and the Eastern Panhandle, in addition to other locations.

Both Howard and Sheetz officials declined to release details on that agreement, although Howard said, "That was a unique venture on our part. We worked with Sheetz stores and with Sheetz management. They had been a very good retailer with us with our tobacco category for adult tobacco consumers, and we approached them with this innovative product."

Until 2008, the Camel Snus came in a tin of 20 pouches that are .4 grams in size. But when the company expanded into new test markets this year, the product had been changed to a .6 gram pouch and came 15 to a tin. That was the size on which Howard based his nicotine calculations.

"Based on consumer feedback, they told us they wanted larger pouches so we increased them to .6 grams," Howard said.

The change does not please Adkins or Anderson.

"This spokesperson is now saying that he is now admitting that they are putting more nicotine in the product than what we found," Adkins said. "These products are horribly addictive."

While smokeless tobacco users reduce or avoid some of the other hazards of smoking cigarettes, including the incidence of lung cancer, research has shown the products can cause or contribute to specific types of cancers that include pancreas, mouth, tongue and esophagus, Adkins said.

Adkins did not have specific statistics on Snus, but he does have some on smokeless tobacco. Research shows that in West Virginia, 13 percent of children in grades sixth through eighth have tried smokeless tobacco products. The number doubles to 26 percent for high school students.

"The kids that reported that they had used tobacco products either had smoke or had used spit tobacco in the 30 days prior to them being surveyed on our youth tobacco survey," he said. "So that doesn't necessarily reflect that they are using it every day. But you know that if they are using just a little bit, they are usually addicted."

Anderson and his colleagues at WVU's Prevention Research Center also tested another Snus product, Tourney Snus, made by Liggett Vector Brands Inc. in North Carolina. Those products had less nicotine than the Camel Snus, Anderson said, at about 2 mg per gram, which was about .05 mg nicotine per serving, he noted.

"That is pretty low," he said. "I don't know even if a consumer would feel any nicotine."

The Tourney Snus are being test marketed in Speedway SuperAmerica stores, which have several locations in the Charleston area. Carrie Bloom, a spokeswoman for Liggett Vector Brands, said the company would not comment on the study.

While Howard maintained that R.J. Reynolds markets the Camel Snus to adults, he also noted that the company does want to attract consumers that include women, who typically do not use other smokeless tobacco products in high numbers.

"The product is intended and marketed to adult tobacco consumers, giving them a different product choice from what they currently use today," Howard said. "It gives them the opportunity to enjoy tobacco pleasure, which is an informed decision that current adult consumers have made, and it's a product that meets societal expectations in that there is no second-hand smoke and no spitting.

"We really believe it offers an opportunity for adult tobacco consumers to enjoy tobacco pleasure while being mindful in consideration to others."

Adkins worries about additional West Virginians becoming tobacco users when he and his colleagues have worked hard to reduce the rate, including with a state Tobacco Quitline that he says has been one of the busiest per capita in the nation.

"The statement that I say is that 4,000 people die in West Virginia every year from tobacco-related illnesses, and the caveat for the tobacco industry is that to break even, they have to have 4,000 replacement users," Adkins said.

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