

Casper hosts spit tobacco summit

Health officials counter chew's 'safer' image

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Laramie went smoke-free last November, but that doesn't mean the town has kicked the habit.

Concerned about increased advertising from U.S. Smokeless Tobacco, which sells Skoal and Copenhagen, health workers there have launched a cam-

paign aimed at college students and other young men in town.

They're putting up posters in bars and on campus calling chew what it is: "Disgusting, addictive and expensive."

Mike Vercauteren with the Wyoming Health Council described the efforts in Casper on Monday at the second spit tobacco summit. Last year's was in Billings.

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The event drew about 250 people from 32 states who said the conferences devoted to

chew are rare.

They said it was a good way to learn how to fight a drug that has new marketing power behind it. Now that smoking is being banned in more public places, chew advertisements are showing people using the product on airplane flights and at the office.

Chew is also being marketed as a safer alternative to smok-

ing, which health officials don't buy.

Wyoming has a special challenge in fighting chew: its long association with rodeo and that western sense of manliness that is somehow enhanced by spitting.

Health advocates said they plan to ask the Legislature to raise taxes on chew this year and also plan to pressure rodeo

leaders to quit accepting sponsorships from tobacco companies.

That will prove a challenge, speakers said. Dr. Alan Blum, director of the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, said it's an ethical issue. Rodeo leaders will say they need the

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money the advertisers provide, but Blum said, "That's not your job to get them their money."

Vercauteren said he's encountered opposition in Laramie. He said he talked to the university's rodeo coach, who "just doesn't want to hear it."

Speakers said people could fight chew in their own towns by asking schools and local government to pass anti-tobacco ordinances, by protesting outside stores that sell chew and by finding positive role models for kids among high school rodeo athletes who don't chew or smoke.

Terry Zink, a junior high health teacher from Rock Springs, came to learn how she could talk to her students about chew. Wyoming has a particularly high percentage of high school students (11 percent of high school boys) and adults (7.6 percent of adults) who chew.

"It's hard to convince them that any tobacco is dangerous to their health," she said.

The conference continues today and Wednesday at the Parkway Plaza with sessions on cessation and treatment, working within the political culture, changing the image of chewers portrayed in adver-

tising, and fighting sponsorship at rodeos.

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