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Reynolds won't snuff out test market

Company denies cigarette is aimed at young, poorly educated women

By DEE GILL
Houston Chronicle

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. intends to go ahead with plans to test market a cigarette despite growing public furor over reports that the new product is targeted at young, poorly educated women.

The company denied reports that its new cigarette, brand named Dakota, is aimed at 18- to 24-year-old women with a high school education or less.

Dakota reportedly will be test marketed in April in Houston. R.J. Reynolds spokeswoman Maura Payne refused to verify either the month or market.

A marketing plan leaked to several newspapers last week described the target group as women whose favorite pastimes include "cruising" and attending hot rod shows and tractor pulls with their boyfriends. The plan was nicknamed "Project V.F." for "virile female."

At Senate committee hearings Tuesday in Washington, cigarette companies were lambasted for targeting their advertising at women, minorities and young people. The hearings were held in connection with a proposal by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., to create a powerful government agency to regulate the tobacco

industry and to campaign against smoking.

"I am not only troubled but outraged," said Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis W. Sullivan when asked about the Dakota brand. "Nobody believes the tobacco companies when they say they are not targeting women and young people. Between 80 and 90 percent of adult smokers start as teen-agers."

Alan Blum, a Houston physician who testified at the hearings, called the plans for Dakota "an obviously smarmy effort to reach women in their childbearing years." Blum is chairman and founder of Doctors Ought to Care,

an anti-smoking group that includes about 5,000 doctors nationwide.

R.J. Reynolds said the outcry is unwarranted. The published marketing plan is a 9-month-old proposal that the company considered but rejected, said Payne.

"During the fall, we decided we'd be foolish to market it only to women," she said.

She added later: "It's frustrating because we're being accused of something that we're not doing."

The publicity has not caused Reynolds to change its marketing plan for Dakota, which Payne said is targeted for men and women who normally smoke Marlboro.

Marlboro, made by Reynolds' chief rival, Philip Morris, has about 25 percent of the cigarette market, she said.

Women's rights leaders and smoking opponents vowed to protest any move by Reynolds to bring Dakota to Houston.

"If Reynolds goes through with this 'virile female' campaign, we will certainly protest," said Phyllis Tucker, president of the Texas National Organization for Women, who lives in the Houston area.

Blum said he met with a group Monday night to organize a campaign against cigarette advertising.

Kroger rattles big saber

Chain may leave

