

- News Release -

Thursday, January 22, 2009

ALBERTA SMOKING RATE HITS ALL-TIME LOW

New national survey data released on Monday by Health Canada reveals that smoking rates among Albertans aged 15 and over hit an all-time low during the first half of 2008 following a province-wide smoking ban that took effect last January.

Nineteen percent of Albertans aged 15-plus were found to be current smokers from January to June, 2008—marking the first time that the provincial smoking rate has dropped below 20 percent. Alberta's smoking rate is slightly higher than the national rate of 18 percent for Canadians aged 15 years and over.

"These results mark a significant milestone in the fight to reduce tobacco use in Alberta" said Les Hagen, ASH executive director. "Less than one in five Albertans are current smokers compared with one in three who were smokers just 20 years ago. We believe that the new Tobacco Reduction Act is largely responsible for the latest reduction in tobacco use."

Recent tobacco revenue projections released by Alberta Finance confirm that tobacco consumption is on the decline. The quarterly fiscal update released in November revealed that provincial tobacco consumption is expected to be down six percent over initial projections for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2009.

Despite the reduction in the overall smoking rate, youth smoking rates remain stubbornly high. The latest data provided by Health Canada revealed that 20 percent of Alberta teens aged 15 to 19 were current smokers in 2007. Health groups blame the affordability of tobacco combined with tobacco industry youth marketing tactics such as candy flavoured tobacco products for the high youth smoking rates.

"Smoking rates among Alberta teens remain disturbingly high despite the gains that have been made in reducing tobacco use among adults" said Robyn Hauck, ASH Calgary representative. "We are calling for another major tobacco tax increase to reverse this trend and prevent thousands of Alberta youth from falling prey to tobacco companies."

- 2 -

“The last major tax increase in 2002 had a profound impact on youth smoking rates and we cannot overlook the importance of tobacco taxation in keeping kids tobacco-free”.

In 2002, the Alberta government increased tobacco taxes by \$2.25 per 25-pack. The tax increase contributed to a 20 percent decline in teen smoking the following year and overall tobacco sales fell by 24%.

“The evidence shows that tobacco taxes are very effective in reducing tobacco use, especially among youth” added Hagen. “We urge the Alberta government to raise tobacco taxes by at least \$2.00 per pack in the upcoming provincial budget to help reverse the high smoking rates among Alberta youth. We simply cannot stand by while tobacco companies continue to target Alberta youth through price reductions, candy flavourings and attractive packages that resemble colour markers and lip gloss.”

Provincial health groups are also calling for a complete ban on all flavoured tobacco products to help curb teen smoking.

Sales of flavoured cigarillos have increased more than one-thousand times since 2003. According to Health Canada data, teenagers are the heaviest users of cigarillos.

During last fall’s federal election, Prime Minister Steven Harper promised that if re-elected, his government would ban flavoured tobacco products. Calgary MLA Jonathon Denis has announced that he is planning to introduce a bill to address flavoured tobacco products in the next session of the Alberta Legislature. Last month, the Ontario Legislature banned the sale of flavoured cigarillos in that province.

- 30 -

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