

campaign for a **smoke-free** alberta

- NEWS RELEASE -

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HEALTH GROUPS URGE NEW HEALTH MINISTER TO SUE TOBACCO COMPANIES

Edmonton - The Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta is urging health minister Gene Zwozdesky to seek government approval to sue tobacco companies for billions of dollars in healthcare costs resulting from the industry's negligence and its deceptive marketing practices.

Last fall, the government passed Bill 48—the *Crown's Right of Recovery Act*—which allows the provincial government to sue tobacco companies for their contribution to the healthcare burden in Alberta. To date, three provinces have initiated healthcare cost recovery lawsuits against tobacco companies including British Columbia, New Brunswick and Ontario. The Ontario government is suing the industry for \$50 billion in total healthcare damages.

“We urge Minister Zwozdesky to hold the tobacco industry accountable for its deplorable actions in undermining the quality of life of Albertans and for placing a huge burden on our healthcare system” said Angeline Webb of the Canadian Cancer Society, Alberta/NWT Division. “The Alberta government has aggressively pursued clean-up costs from various industries including energy, transportation, manufacturing and insurance. For the past decade, the Alberta government has required auto insurers to pay for healthcare costs resulting from motor vehicle collisions. The tobacco industry should not get off the hook for the tremendous damage resulting from its deplorable business practices”.

The coalition contends that Alberta taxpayers have been paying for the tobacco industry's transgressions for many years and taxpayers deserve to be compensated for the resulting healthcare costs. Tobacco use is estimated to have cost the healthcare system \$470 million in 2002 alone. The industry's total liability could exceed \$10 billion over the past several decades.

“No industry should be allowed to get away with deceptive and fraudulent practices and these activities will likely continue until the tobacco industry is held fully accountable for its actions” said Les Hagen of Action on Smoking & Health. “The marketing of light cigarettes is arguably one of the biggest consumer frauds ever devised. The promotion of candy-flavoured tobacco products is a deplorable strategy designed to get kids hooked. A healthcare cost recovery lawsuit will force the industry to change its objectionable behaviour based on the experience of the United States”.

The health groups also believe that a lawsuit could result in the creation of new tobacco control measures to further reduce tobacco use. The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement in the U.S. resulted in a ban on tobacco sponsorships, the elimination of tobacco cartoon characters such as “Joe Camel”, and restrictions on youth access to tobacco. Canadian governments could demand further restrictions from tobacco companies as part of a judgment against the industry.

The costs of launching a lawsuit are believed to be inconsequential compared to the potential rewards. The New Brunswick lawsuit is sponsored by a consortium of blue-chip law firms on a contingency basis at very little cost to government. The Alberta government has reportedly been approached with a similar offer.

The coalition is encouraged by Gene Zwozdesky’s appointment as Minister of Health and Wellness.

“While serving as Associate Minister of Health and Wellness in 2001, Mr. Zwozdesky was instrumental in securing government support for the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Strategy which has contributed to record setting declines in tobacco use” said Ev Glasser of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT & Nunavut. “We look forward to Mr. Zwozdesky’s continued leadership in promoting tobacco use reduction and further enhancing the quality of life of Albertans”.

The health groups recently submitted letters to the health minister and all MLAs urging the government to launch a lawsuit against the tobacco industry.

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