

Summary of the NH fire safer cigarette bill:

The fire safer cigarette bill, HB 645, is headed to the floor of the NH House on January 4th. Originally introduced in January of 2005 it was reported out by the House Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee as ought to pass 15-0. It was then referred to the House Ways and Means Committee, which voted to retain the bill to look into whether it would have any impact on state revenues. Some interested parties alleged that the cigarettes would be perceived as being inferior and thus sales would decrease, as would tobacco tax revenues. The bill was sent to a subcommittee chaired by Rep. Shawn Jasper. After a number of meetings this fall the subcommittee voted 5-0 to recommend to the full committee to report the bill as ought to pass. The full committee then voted 17-2 to report the bill as ought to pass with amendment. The amendment changes the designation of the cigarettes to fire safer, instead of fire safe, a more accurate name. It also changes the effective date to July 1, 2007 and specifies that the standards to be used on the fire safer cigarettes by the state fire marshal must be the same as those used in New York. The amendment also removed all enforcement powers from the Department of Revenue Administration, which did not want to be involved in enforcement. With now two favorable reports from House committees and apparent support from the House leadership, the chances that the bill will pass the House in January seem quite good. There is likely to be a struggle in the Senate, however.

The purpose of the bill is to require that cigarettes sold in the state after July 1, 2007 meet standards that make them far less likely to burn to the end and thus far less likely to cause fires. New York was the first state to pass a bill, which it did in 2000. The law was not implemented until 2004, but it has been in place since then. Vermont and California have since passed similar laws. Canada passed a law for the whole country which took effect in October of this year. A bill in Massachusetts has made it out of committee with a favorable vote. At the federal level efforts have been made for years to pass legislation, but the legislation has never been successful. Rep. Joseph Moakley from Massachusetts was a champion of the legislation.

Some of the arguments used to support the bill include that cigarette fires cause close to 1,000 deaths and 3,000 injuries each year in the US. Cigarettes are the ignition source in fires responsible for over 25% of all fire deaths and are the nation's largest single cause of such deaths. Property losses are over half a billion dollars. In fires attributed to dropped cigarettes there is one death to every four injuries. Cigarette related fires are up 19% nationally.

A fire safer cigarette, also known as a reduced propensity or low ignition cigarette, has less propensity to ignite upholstered furniture or mattresses when dropped, forgotten or carelessly discarded. This can be accomplished through small design changes in the cigarette, including the use of less dense tobacco, less porous paper, a smaller diameter, a filter tip, the addition of "speed bumps" on the filter paper, and the elimination of citrates that are added to the paper to maintain burning.

The tobacco lobby has opposed the bill, arguing, among other things, that this should be done at the national level, not state by state.

To address the argument about potential loss of tobacco tax revenues to the state the NH Association of Fire Chiefs asked UNH Professor Ross Gittell if a graduate student under his direction could study the experience in New York to see what the likelihood was that such a law would impact cigarette sales in NH. The study concluded that NH should expect no significant change in NH tobacco tax revenues from such a change in the law. An earlier study by the Harvard School of Public Health reached a similar conclusion more generally, not specific to NH.