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California mulls cigarette tax increase. Do hikes actually reduce smoking?

Proponents of the measure say they have collected nearly a million signatures in support of tripling the state tobacco tax.

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Smoking could become a pricier habit in California come November.

A campaign – whose backers include a billionaire environmentalist, medical groups, and organized labor – has collected enough signatures for a ballot measure to raise the state’s cigarette tax to \$2.87, nearly tripling it. If the San Diego County Registrar of Voters verifies enough signatures, the measure would appear on the Nov. 8 ballot, next to a measure to legalize the recreational use of marijuana, also pending signature verification.

The campaign to raise the cigarette tax comes on the heels of the state’s ban of tobacco sales to anyone under 21, marking a substantial shift in the Golden state in public attitudes and policies against tobacco use. And it could spur other states to follow suit.

“I think when state policymakers see that another state has implemented a progressive public health measure ... they are more likely to positively consider adopting it themselves,” Kerry Malloy Snyder, assistant director at Public Health and Tobacco Policy Center at the Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, told The Christian Science Monitor, shortly after the California Gov. Jerry Brown signed May 4 the legislation into law that raises the smoking age from 18 to 21.

The measure to increase the cigarette tax proposes earmarking it on services for Medi-Cal, California’s version of Medicaid, anti-smoking campaigns, and medical research. The Save Lives California coalition is expected to present nearly one million signatures to the county registers office during a press conference on Monday, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Although California smokers could pay more for a pack, they would pay much less than in New York, the state with the highest cigarette tax. California’s cigarette tax stands at \$0.87, bringing the average price of a pack of cigarettes to \$5.89, according to fairreporters.com. California hasn’t raised its cigarette tax since 1998. The tax in New York is \$4.35 for every pack of 20, according to fairreporters.com. The state with the lowest cigarette tax is Missouri at \$0.17, according to fairreporters.com.

Although policymakers tend to correlate high cigarette taxes with a decrease in smokers, experts disagree on whether such measures actually accomplish this aim. In a study

published by the Cato Institute, a think tank whose founders include Charles Koch, researchers say raising cigarette taxes lead to minimal decreases in smoking.

“The justification of future taxes should be based on the public finance aspects of cigarette taxes such as the regressiveness, volatility, and rate of revenue growth associated with those taxes,” reads the study.

The study found it will take a sizable tax increase – around 100 percent – to decrease adult smoking by as much as five percent. The proposed California tax is of this order.

Other studies have found that increasing taxes can have a significant impact on adolescent smoking rates. Analysis of teen smoking rates following a federal tax hike in 2009 found a significant decrease in the use of both traditional and smokeless tobacco products among middle and high school students.

"There would have been approximately 220,000 - 287,000 more current smokers and 135,000 - 203,000 more smokeless tobacco users among middle school and high school students (age 14 - 18) in the United States in May 2009 had the federal tax not increased in April 2009," one study found.

Some observers say that the cumulative effect of this proposed measure, on top of the increase in the age Californians can buy tobacco, will likely lead to less smoking in the Golden state.

“[I]t’s always difficult to determine the effect of a particular policy in isolation, given that there are often other factors,” wrote Ms. Snyder at the Public Health and Tobacco Policy Center to the Monitor. “In [New York City], for example, Tobacco 21 was adopted around the same time as other innovative tobacco control measures ... restricting certain tobacco product discount sales.”