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Government eyes crackdown on ‘troublesome problem’ of malt liquor

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In the land of free choice and home of a thousand brews, it might surprise some Americans that Uncle Sam is researching ways to restrict certain alcoholic beverages, and he is doing it with their own tax dollars.

Since 2012, the National Institutes for Health has spent over \$1.6 million studying the “troublesome product” of malt liquor.

“Malt liquor is a troublesome problem for communities,” the grant project states. “Malt liquor is a larger beer with a higher alcohol content than regular beer (4-5 vs. 6-8%), and is associated with frequent daily drinking, heavy drinking, and with problem behaviors such as theft, disorderly conduct, assaults, and panhandling.”

But the scope of the NIH study goes far beyond studying the health and social consequences of drinking a 40-ouncer. Instead, researchers at the University of Minnesota are looking into how cities can better pursue prohibition laws against malt liquor, with the goal of establishing even more effective means of restricting the adult beverage.

“About one-third of the largest U.S. cities have adopted policies to restrict malt liquor often overcoming significant hurdles to do so,” the grant states. “To date, there have been no studies in the published literature that have evaluated the effectiveness of these policies. Rigorous evaluation studies are needed to address current gaps in assessing the effectiveness of malt liquor policies.”

The grant evaluates current laws against malt liquor and aims to come up with new ways to restrict 40s and other alcoholic beverages, which are legal to Americans 21 and older. The specific objectives of the grant include the goal to “develop [new] measures of the restrictiveness of malt liquor and other alcohol policies.”

Researchers will “focus on state alcohol policies most likely to influence the success of malt liquor policies including underage possession/consumption, purchase, furnishing, false

identification, beer taxes, and the retail and whole distribution system for beer,” the grant description states. The project is slated to end in May and has cost taxpayers \$1,626,038 so far.

For using Americans’ tax dollars to evaluate and create laws that would limit their freedom to choose their brew, NIH wins the Golden Hammer, a weekly distinction awarded by The Washington Times highlighting examples of wasteful and questionable federal spending.

Spending watchdogs say the grant represents a major overreach on behalf of the Obama administration and seeks to create more nanny-state policies using Americans’ own tax dollars.

“This is another example of the Obama Administration buttinskis wanting to tell everyone what to do. It is one thing to determine the health impacts of Malt Liquor but quite another to attempt to skew state laws by engaging in highly subjective effectiveness research,” said Richard Manning, president of Americans for Limited Government, a conservative spending watchdog.

“Once again, Obama’s nanny state wants to force people to drink the alcoholic beverage choice of a chardonnay drinking D.C. bureaucrat’s rather than their own.”

Pete Sepp, president of the National Taxpayers Union, argued that while the NIH can objectively study the outcomes of laws, “pursuing an agenda for new restrictions would strike many Americans as crossing the line into taxpayer-funded advocacy.”

When asked by The Times for comment, an NIH spokeswoman replied by copy-and-pasting the grant description.

“NIH’s mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability,” the reply said in part.

Chris Edwards, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute, noted that while “there is broad support for the NIH to fund basic science,” this research “focuses on micromanaging the behavior of private citizens with a Big Brother knows best approach. Well, Big Brother doesn’t know best — it has made many errors on its food and alcohol policies over the years.”

According to the grant description, the study is relevant to the NIH’s public health mission because of its “practical and real-world implications for cities dealing with problems related to malt liquor use and wishing to adopt malt liquor policies.”

Critics also argued that the study seems to be discriminatory against low-income people, who tend to favor malt liquor.

“Malt liquor has no higher alcohol content than many craft beers that higher-income people consume,” Mr. Edwards said. “So I wonder what’s next — will NIH researchers be spying on yuppies drinking craft beers in their living rooms to prevent abuse?”

So far, results of the study have concluded that Google Street View is effective in identifying where malt liquor is sold.

“Google Street View (GSV) can be used as an effective tool to conduct virtual neighborhood audits,” one published paper associated with the grant reads. “We expand on this research by exploring the utility of a GSV-based neighborhood audit to measure and match target and comparison study areas. We developed a GSV-based inventory to measure characteristics of retail alcohol stores and their surrounding neighborhoods.”

Mr. Edwards said the “idea that these federally funded researchers are using Google Street View to study and then manipulate private citizens in local neighborhoods is disturbing.”

He argued, that just like when the U.S. decided to implement Prohibition in the 1920s, the plan to restrict malt liquor could backfire.

“People who consume malt liquor may simply move to other, perhaps more dangerous sorts of alcohol or drugs. Banning things doesn’t get to the root problems of any sort of substance abuse,” Mr. Edwards said.