

Oregon to sue tobacco companies

■ CASE: Oregon is the 27th state to file suit against six major tobacco corporations

By Landon Hall
The Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon will sue six major tobacco companies in an effort to recoup some of its Medicaid costs used to treat smoking-related illnesses, state Attorney General Hardy Myers announced Monday.

But a lobbyist for tobacco giant R.J. Reynolds said Oregon is just jumping on a legal bandwagon already crowded with other states. He added that Oregon would see little money from any settlement after lawyers and the federal government are through with the case.

Attorneys general in two other states — in Arkansas and Montana — also announced Monday they would file suit against the tobacco industry. With Oregon, that brings to 27 the number of states that have sued or intend to sue tobacco companies.

"It's a battle I think Oregon needs to be part of," Myers, who took office in January, said at a news conference Monday.

The tobacco industry is negotiating a multibillion-dollar settlement with various state governments. Myers acknowledged that an impending national settlement, which could include a cap on future lawsuits by states, played a part in Oregon's decision to sue.

Mark Nelson, a state lobbyist for R.J. Reynolds, says it's no surprise Oregon is getting in on the act.

During the negotiations, "it became clear that a number of states

were going to jump in on the lawsuits in an effort to try to preserve their place in the litigation line," Nelson said.

Asked if Oregon was "piling on" tobacco companies along with other states, Myers replied sarcastically, "It couldn't happen to a nicer bunch."

Myers wouldn't say how much Oregon would seek in its lawsuit, but he said the figure would be based on the amount the Oregon health plan spends each year on smoking-related illnesses, estimated to be about \$60 million.

The state will hire a private law firm to handle the case on a contingency basis. The firm would get a percentage of any settlement or damages awarded to the state.

Nelson called the contingency idea "ludicrous." He said the federal government — which provides Oregon with most of its Medicaid money — would get 62 percent of any settlement. Add in the lawyers' standard cut of 33 percent, and that leaves Oregon with just 5 percent.

Just because Oregon is suing the tobacco industry doesn't mean the state won't continue to make money from it.

The state has \$144 million of the Public Employees Retirement System fund invested in tobacco stocks, including \$100 million in Phillip Morris. The entire PERS fund is \$25 billion. The money is invested by private firms that are required by state law to get the highest returns possible.

Michael Parker, a spokesman for state Treasurer Jim Hill, doesn't see the state suing an industry in which it has a financial stake as a conflict of interest.

"We don't invest in things that are socially social good or bad.

“Smoking costs Oregonians a quarter of a billion dollars a year in medical expenses. Tobacco companies need to compensate states like Oregon which have picked up the cost of treating tobacco's victims.”

— John Kitzhaber
Oregon Governor

We invest in things that make money," Parker said.

Gov. John Kitzhaber said Myers' decision to join the legal action would serve the interests of Oregonians and Oregon's children.

"Smoking costs Oregonians a quarter of a billion dollars a year in medical expenses," Kitzhaber said. "Tobacco companies need to compensate states like Oregon which have picked up the cost of treating tobacco's victims."

The companies that will be named in Oregon's lawsuit are American Tobacco Co. Ltd., Lorillard Tobacco Co. Inc., Phillip Morris Inc., R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., United States Tobacco Co. and British American Tobacco Co.

Myers said any settlement with the tobacco companies would include some restrictions on smoking-related advertising.

"We're not going to have a deal unless we bring that to a stop in the most effective way we can," Myers said.

Myers said the lawsuit will be filed in about three weeks.

Legislature pushing to reform term limit laws

■ MEASURE: The bill would place a potential change to Oregon's term limits legislation on the ballot in this fall's election

By Charles Beggs
The Associated Press

SALEM — Oregonians will vote on legislative term limits again this fall if the House goes along with a measure passed by the Senate on Monday.

No one spoke against the proposed ballot measure as the Senate approved it 19-8. House approval would put the measure on the ballot in November.

In 1992, Oregon voters strongly passed a constitutional amendment limiting the number of terms

politicians can serve.

The current measure would eliminate limits of six years in the House and eight years in the Senate, which amounts to three House terms and two Senate terms.

But because it keeps the overall 12-year limit on legislative service, it keeps faith with the voters, said the sponsor of the measure, Sen. Randy Miller, R-Lake Oswego.

Three House terms do not really amount to six years' service, Miller said, because legislative sessions do not last all year. A representative would serve less than two years in session during that period, he said.

The ASUO Executive offers new positions

The ASUO Executive needs you.

Applications are now being accepted for the 23 positions on the 1997-98 ASUO Executive Staff.

In addition, applications are being accepted for two new positions that ASUO President-elect Bill Miner and Vice president-elect Ben Unger have created. The new positions are a project coordinator and a graduate law staff member. In addition, the job descriptions for many positions have been revised in order to further spec-

TODAY'S NEWS BRIEFLY

ify responsibilities.

"There's something for everybody," Unger said. "We're hoping to get a good mix of people because the positions really vary."

The new project coordinator will coordinate projects and events, Unger said. He gave the example of an intern this year who worked on

projects like implementing the amphitheater and organizing ASUO-sponsored events. By making this into an actual job, "large-scale projects can get the focus they need," he said.

All positions offer stipends, which range from \$100 to \$175 per month. Work-study positions are welcome to apply.

Job descriptions and applications are available in the ASUO office in EMU Suite four. Applications are being accepted up until 5 p.m. Wednesday.

— Compiled by Angie Suchy

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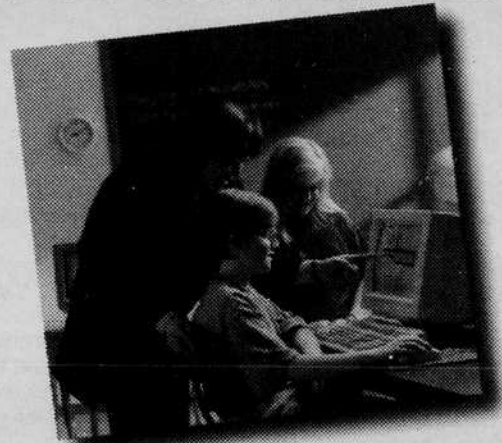
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