Cancer Research Fund Bill Killed By Panel

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A bill to levy an added four-cent tax on cigarettes to create a $70 million cancer research fund is dead for the session.

"I thought we had a good chance, but the number weren't right," commented Rep. Leo Watermeier, author of the measure.

The House Ways and Means Committee on Tuesday voted 10-4 to defer action on Watermeier's bill — in effect, killing the bill for the second time since 1980.

The defeat came after intense lobbying by the tobacco industry.

As written, the three-year tax measure would have paid for a statewide tumor registry to collect data on the incidence of cancer in Louisiana, research on cancer and cardiopulmonary disease, and improved clinical treatment facilities.

Louisiana, with one of the highest cancer rates in the nation, already has an 11-cent tax on a pack of cigarettes. The money is returned to local governments.

"If a fellow wants to smoke, if the pack is a dollar, or a dollar and half, he's going to smoke," said Rep. John Hainkel of New Orleans, who urged passage of the tax.

According to American Lung Association estimates, 14,000 new cases of cancer were reported in Louisiana in 1981, and 7,300 died of cancer — 2,000 of them lung cancer victims.

The lung association estimates the cost of respiratory disease in Louisiana — considering only Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security benefits — is on the order of $300 million a year.

"Nonsmokers are actually footing the bill for health care and disability payments for smokers, and are subsidizing paying for the smokers' treatments," said Ben Fontaine, a lobbyist for the association.

At the same time, however, Louisiana receives less than two-tenths of 1 percent of American Cancer Institute research grants.

"Why subsidize other industries in this state to make a go of it, and then turn our backs on the cancer research industry?" Joe Woods, a lobbyist for the Louisiana Wholesale Candy and Tobacco Distributors Association, said the state has many other industries which could be considered as cancer revenue sources.

Gerald Peters, president of the 125-member distributors' association, said the 9 percent increase in the price of cigarettes would hurt dealers everywhere.

"All costs increase with no additional profits, and this would also hurt the little man," Peters said.

Rep. Terry Gee of Gretna pounced on that one.

"The poor little guy on the corner — he's dying of cancer, too. I think your arguments are poor," Gee said.

New Roads Rep. Clyde W. Kimball, himself a cancer victim, told the committee he had been an outpatient at the M.D. Anderson medical complex in Houston for the past 10 years.

"But no," Kimball said, "I'm not for taxing one segment of society that affects everyone."