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Tobacco vs. alcohol

Yeah, sure, tobacco's bad but what about alcohol?

You hear this a lot from opponents of higher tobacco taxes: If smokers are forced to pay more to spare education and other services from the budget ax, the argument goes, why not drinkers? After all, alcohol causes a quarter of Kentucky's highway deaths.

Gov. Steve Beshear is asking the legislature to raise the tobacco tax. A bill has also been filed that would up the state tax on alcohol.

It's well known that Kentucky boasts some of the nation's cheapest cigarettes and the highest death rate from tobacco.

But what about alcohol?

Valid comparisons of state alcohol taxes are nearly impossible because there are so many variables.

Judged exclusively by excise taxes, Kentucky's alcohol taxes are low.

But the excise tax is just part of the picture. Kentucky also levies an 11 percent wholesale tax on alcohol. Packaged alcohol is then exempt from retail sales tax. Alcohol by the drink is subject to the regular 6 percent sales tax. In other words, double taxation on a glass of wine, beer or bourbon.

Further complicating comparisons: the large number of "control states," including Ohio, West Virginia and Virginia, where package stores are government-owned.

Economic studies commissioned by the alcohol industry conclude that when all the variables are taken into account, Kentucky's alcohol taxes are high. Of the non-control states, only Alaska and Florida have a higher effective tax per gallon of distilled spirits, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

Bottom line: Before changing alcohol taxes, Kentucky should commission an independent comparative study.

Cigarette taxes are straightforward. Kentucky's tax of 30 cents a pack is far below the national average of \$1.19 and the 70 cent-a-pack average in surrounding states.

What about consumption?

Kentuckians smoke more than residents of any other state. Adult smoking is almost always highest here; our kids and pregnant women smoke at the highest or second-highest rate.

Kentuckians are not such big drinkers, though. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that Kentucky is among the 11 states with the lowest per capita consumption: 1.99 gallons or less. U.S. per capita consumption is 2.24 gallons.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Kentucky is below the national average for alcohol dependence and abuse.

Kentucky's tobacco policies receive a failing grade from the National Lung Association.

But Kentucky gets high marks for its laws against drunken driving.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving gave Kentucky the third-best ranking, behind Utah and Idaho, on its most recent state progress report. MADD's only criticism was of Kentucky's weak law on ignition interlock, the technology that blocks problem drinkers from starting their cars when they fail a breath test.

Forbes also compiles state-by-state comparisons of DUI fatalities. The magazine found you were more likely to be killed by drunken driving in Tennessee, Missouri and West Virginia than in Kentucky. You'd be safer in Indiana, Ohio, Virginia and Illinois.

An estimated 7,848 Kentuckians a year die from smoking, not counting deaths from secondhand smoke and fires. Drunken driving killed 210 people in Kentucky in 2007.

Everyone's entitled to their own views on the relative harms of smoking and drinking. But viewed from a broad public-health perspective, the one that lawmakers should take, tobacco inflicts far more harm on Kentuckians than alcohol and is under-taxed by any measure.

Even if alcohol taxes are too low, that's no excuse for not raising the tax on tobacco.