

The War on Big Gulp

Efforts to curb sugary drinks are encountering resistance from Big Soda. **By BRAD HERTZ**

WHILE *STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS* WILL NOT BE IN THEATERS for a few months, another force has already awakened—the force of government health advocates taking on the soda and sugar-sweetened beverage industry. In recent years, these drinks have come under a great deal of scrutiny due, in part, to studies linking them to health problems such as diabetes and obesity. According to researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, “The average American consumes nearly three times the recommended amount of added sugar every day, and the most common single source is sugar-sweetened beverages.”

These findings have led local governments across the nation to regulate sugar-sweetened beverages. In 2013, New York Mayor **Michael Bloomberg** tried to ban Big Gulp-type drinks from the Big Apple, but the courts invalidated the law. In California, the cities of El Monte and Richmond failed to obtain the votes needed to implement a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. San Francisco and Berkeley had these types of soda tax measures on the ballot in November 2014, and while both received a majority vote, Berkeley’s passed but San Francisco’s failed because it fell short of the majority needed.

Thus, Berkeley became the first city in the nation to impose a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. The tax took effect in March 2015, and has already raised more than \$100,000 in revenue. However, implementing the tax has not been without some complications: most notably a lack of clarity about how the tax should be carried out. As a result, some businesses have stopped selling these beverages altogether to avoid the penalties that would result from failing to collect the tax. Despite this, the general consensus in Berkeley is that the tax is providing much-needed

funding for educational programs on nutrition and healthy living.

San Francisco recently moved to the forefront on this issue with UCSF’s ban on the sale of sugar-sweetened drinks on campus. While California’s K through 12 schools prohibit the sale of sodas, UCSF is the first university in the nation to implement this kind of ban. Additionally, the Board of Supervisors recently passed three ordinances regulating soda advertisements and city spending on sugar-sweetened beverages. These ordinances will keep advertisements for sugar-sweetened beverages off of city property, require such advertisements to include health warning labels, and prohibit city spending on sugar-sweetened beverages.

As expected, the soda and sugar-sweetened beverage industries are not happy with these regulations. The industry has been referred to as “Big Soda”—likening its efforts to defeat soda regulations with “Big Tobacco’s” crusade to combat tobacco regulation. Big Soda argues that increasing the price of soda so that government can share in the revenues does nothing to inform or educate the public about making healthy beverage choices. Big Soda also maintains that going to such lengths to regulate soda is unnecessary and overly intrusive.

It’s clear that the soda industry needs to change its advertising and sales strategy—and maybe even its products—to maintain the trust of a public that is becoming skeptical of the image being sold. It remains to be seen where the next front in the “soda wars” will come from, but you can bet that Bay Area governments will be leading the charge. **NHG**

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