

Research Study: Court-Ordered Corrections of Tobacco Industry Racketeering Oklahoma Poll Shows Strong Support for Policies and Rejection of Tobacco Industry Influences

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A federal court ordered Philip Morris USA, R.J. Reynolds, and other tobacco companies to publish “corrective statements” starting Sunday, November 26, 2017. In 2006, the court found the companies to be in violation of civil racketeering (RICO) laws, ordering them to disseminate through newspapers, television, package inserts and corporate websites the statements providing facts about nicotine enhancement, light and low tar cigarettes, addiction, health effects of smoking, and health effects of secondhand smoke. Publication was long-delayed by extensive legal appeals.

A cross-sectional survey of 639 Oklahoma adults was conducted May 16-24, 2017 to assess awareness of the corrective statements and major court findings and to simulate their likely impact on attitudes towards tobacco control policies, tobacco industry influences, and lawmakers’ trust in tobacco companies and tobacco company lobbyists. Survey results include the following:

- Of the 18 corrective statements and 10 major court findings, public awareness is lowest for the court findings that the companies violated racketeering laws (24.9%), committed fraud (32.9%), and are likely to continue to commit fraud (37.1%). Only about half of Oklahoma adults are aware that the companies intentionally designed cigarettes to make them more addictive (45.5%), denied secondhand smoke harms nonsmokers (52.7%), and that “low tar” and “light” cigarette smokers inhale essentially the same amount of tar and nicotine as they would from regular cigarettes (48.7%). Because the survey used an aided awareness design, actual public awareness may be lower.
- There is strong public support for each of the 12 tobacco control policies surveyed, including banning smoking inside all public places and workplaces (79.3%), increasing taxes on cigarettes (67.1%), raising the minimum age to buy cigarettes to age 21 (80.1%), and funding programs to help prevent youth from smoking and to help smokers quit (86.5%). Greater public awareness of the statements and court findings will likely increase overall public support for some policies and increase the intensity of support for others.
- Public support is strong for lawmakers to reject potential tobacco industry influences. About two out of three Oklahoma adults think lawmakers should refuse meals or other gifts from tobacco company lobbyists (70.5%) or campaign contributions from tobacco company lobbyists (70.8%). Only one in six (16.7%) think lawmakers should allow tobacco companies or tobacco company lobbyists to help write laws. Greater awareness of the statements and findings may increase the intensity of support for lawmakers’ rejection of potential tobacco industry influences.
- When asked what lawmakers should do if a tobacco-related law was written or influenced by a tobacco company or tobacco company lobbyist, only about one in 50 Oklahoman adults (1.7%) think lawmakers should “leave the law as it is” while nearly three out of four think lawmakers should either “revise the law” (33.5%) or “remove the law and start over” (38.6%).
- Only about one in four (22.5%) Oklahoma adults think “lawmakers should trust tobacco company lobbyists to provide accurate information on tobacco issues” and only about one in three (36.3%) think “lawmakers should trust tobacco companies as much as they trust other companies.” Exposure to the statements and findings will likely reduce the extent to which the public thinks lawmakers should trust tobacco companies or their lobbyists.
- Less than one in ten Oklahoma adults (8.5%) think tobacco companies are now taking responsibility for the harm caused by smoking.