

## **Fox News**

# **Push to raise smoking age to 21 could light up after Hawaii OKs change**

By Matthew Fossen

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Anti-tobacco advocates are claiming "momentum" in their push to raise the smoking age to 21, on the heels of Hawaii becoming the first state to approve the change.

Gov. David Ige signed the bill raising the minimum age, which is set to go into effect next January, on June 19.

Now, lawmakers in several other states are weighing following suit -- whether Hawaii's historic step will light a match under the campaign nationally remains to be seen.

"Now that it has happened, it may be seen as being more likely to pass in another state," said Karmen Hanson, program manager at the National Conference of State Legislatures. "If another, large, mainland state passes a tobacco purchase age to 21 it would be pretty significant, because no 'large state' has yet to pass this type of legislation."

It could be California.

The state Senate several weeks ago overwhelmingly approved a bill raising the smoking age to 21; it now awaits a vote in the California State Assembly.

In the West, lawmakers in Washington state and Oregon also are considering similar bills, and a Utah lawmaker reportedly has reintroduced legislation for the 2016 session. Similar debates have been underway in Vermont, New Jersey and elsewhere.

But while New Jersey and a handful of other states previously set the minimum age for buying tobacco at 19, only cities and counties had actually lifted the age to 21 before Hawaii's bill. Among them are New York City and dozens of municipalities in Massachusetts. In most places, the age is still 18.

Proponents for raising the smoking age at the state level cite studies showing most tobacco users start before 21, and argue raising the age could cut smoking habits considerably.

Matthew Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, said in a statement that Hawaii's new law would save lives and claimed "growing momentum" for raising the smoking age across the country. "Increasing the sale age to 21 will reduce tobacco use among youth and young adults -- age groups when nearly all smoking begins and that are heavily targeted by the tobacco industry," he said.

Though there's no telling whether those would-be smokers would simply wait until 21 to start, Myers said the move would at least help "keep tobacco out of high schools."

But critics of the proposed changes echo an argument often used to challenge the drinking age -- suggesting it's rather absurd to let young adults join the military at 18, but not have a cigarette until 21.

Hawaii state Democratic Sen. Gil Riviere told the Associated Press, "You can sign contracts, you can get married, you can go to war and lose an arm or lose an eye ... you can come back and you're 20 years old and you can't have a cigarette."

Electronic cigarette companies also spoke out against the Hawaii proposal, arguing it unfairly classified vapor products as tobacco products and would crush the industry.

The movement to raise the smoking age has proceeded in fits and starts.

Colorado and Utah debated the legislation last year, as did Maryland, but never crossed the finish line.

"I've seen this type of age increase bill for at least five years," Hanson said.

But proponents for change point to sobering statistics. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in five Americans dies from tobacco-induced diseases. And while health organizations tout diminishing teen-smoking rates, Department of Health figures show that over 5,600 kids try smoking each year in Hawaii alone.

The industry, though, has been reinvigorated with the advent of e-cigarettes. And the broader tobacco industry spends billions yearly in advertising.

Another obstacle to raising the smoking age may be the issue of tax revenue. Hawaii's \$3.40-a-pack tax is one of the highest in the nation; raising the smoking age means foregoing some of that revenue.

The Tax Policy Center estimated that in 2012, total state and local cigarette taxes across the United States brought in \$17.6 billion.

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