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UK Coalition joins EU pledge to fight fire with fire safer cigarettes

Fire fighters, fire victims and campaigners from across Europe have come together to form a powerful coalition. Their objective is to drive through new measures to prevent much of the avoidable death and disfigurement arising from fires caused by cigarettes.

The RIP Coalition from the UK has joined forces with the EU RIP Alliance and other groups across Europe to campaign for the introduction of "fire safer cigarettes". Consistent international fire statistics are hard to find but in the UK fire statistics show that cigarettes, pipe and cigars are the biggest cause of fire deaths in the home¹. In 2005, 82 deaths and over 1,000 injuries occurred as a result of fires caused by cigarette fires - accounting for one third of all accidental fatal fires in the home. It is not known just how many Europeans die from cigarette related fires but a survey of EU Member States suggest at least 1,000 deaths every year² while a European Union survey of Norway and 14 Member States found that in these countries alone, cigarette fires caused €13 million in damage to property³. The RIP Coalition claim that many of these deaths and horrifying injuries could be avoided by tiny adjustments to cigarettes that make them go out if they are left unattended. These cigarettes are already produced and sold as standard in Canada, across much of the United States and will soon be introduced in Australia. However, the same cigarette companies that already produce these cigarettes appear reluctant to offer people in UK and the rest of EU the same protection.

The answer, says the Coalition, is in supporting Europe-wide measures to make cigarette companies offer the same standard of protection to all EU Member States. The European Commission is considering taking those steps under the General Product Safety Directive with the full support of safety campaigners and the UK Government.

Speaking at the European Parliament to launch a European Pledge for Fire Safer Cigarettes, Arlene McCarthy MEP Chairwoman of the European Parliament Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection said:

'There is no such thing as a safe cigarette. Certainly, cigarette free homes would make for more effective fire prevention. However, we emphasise that reduced ignition propensity (RIP) cigarettes are safer than cigarettes currently sold in Europe and represent an effective, low cost, almost self-regulating approach to reduce fires and fire deaths in Europe'

Reformers propose to introduce a simple standard requiring that cigarettes be designed to go out if left unattended⁴. How they achieve this standard is up to the cigarette companies but so far simply adding two tiny bands of thicker paper has been enough to meet the standard elsewhere. These tiny "speed bumps" add less than half of one percent on to the price of a pack and evidence from the US shows that smokers cannot taste the difference.⁵

Even if the Commission were to act tomorrow cigarette companies would claim 3 to 5 years to introduce the production standards although they are already manufacturing the same cigarettes elsewhere. Campaigners and some Member States are running out of patience and Finland is already taking the first steps towards national legislation.

Speaking on behalf of the EU RIP Alliance Val Shawcross, Chair of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority said:

'Every week cigarettes cause 250 fires in European homes, needlessly killing smokers and non-smokers alike, causing horrifying injuries and putting fire fighters' lives at risk. All that stands between life and pointless death is two wafer thin bands of paper. That's why this Alliance will not rest until the law requires tobacco manufacturers to provide the people of Europe with the same protection from cigarette fires they now get in other parts of the world'

With such a simple and low cost proposal to save thousands of lives, the EU Alliance might expect to have an easy ride but many health campaigners fear they have a fight on their hands. Lobbyists campaigning on behalf of cigarette companies are already at work and the Tobacco industry is seeking to suggest that the standard will not make a difference. The fault, they say lies not with a dangerous product but with careless smokers.

*'There is no such thing as a fire safer cigarette and the simple fact is that careless use and disposal of cigarettes can cause smoking related fires.'*⁶

To find out more about the RIP Coalition and the campaign for "fire safer cigarettes" go to: <http://www.firesafercigarettes.org.uk>

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Contact Martin Dockrell, Policy & Campaigns Manager 020 7739 5902 (w) ISDN available

Notes to Editor

- a) Created in 2006, The EU RIP Alliance is a new independent and flexible partnership between the Smoke Free Partnership, the European Child Safety Alliance, EuroSafe (www.childsafetyeurope.org), the European Older People's Platform (www.age-platform.org), the European Federation of Nurses Associations (www.efnweb.eu/version1/en/index.html), the European Public Health Alliance (www.eph.org), Eurocare (www.eurocare.org), PGEU (www.pgeu.org), the Health & Environment Alliance (www.env-health.org), the London Assembly's European Office (www.london.gov.uk) and Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) www.ash.org.uk (London).
- b) Given that it is technologically and economically feasible for cigarettes to meet fire-safety standards, the EU RIP Alliance aims to promote in collaboration with other EU organisations such as the European Fire Safety Network, the introduction of reduced-ignition propensity based on the same standard as in New York and Canada (ASTM International) E2187.
- c) ASTM2187 *Standard Test Method for Measuring the Ignition Strength of Cigarettes*. The test measures the frequency of cigarettes extinguishing when left unattended. It is based on the *Cigarette Extinction Test Method* developed by the United States National Institute of Standards and Technology. In this test, a lit cigarette is placed on a set number (three, ten or fifteen) of layers of standard laboratory filter paper. The filter paper acts as a heat sink for the burning cigarette. Once the cigarette coal has cooled to a certain temperature, it should self-extinguish. The more layers of filter paper used, the sooner the cigarette should self-extinguish. For each number of layers of filter paper, the procedure is repeated 40 times. Failure is defined as the cigarette burning its full length. The results are then presented as "percent full-length burns."
- d) The Hearing on Fire Safer Cigarettes is hosted by Arlene McCarthy MEP Chairwoman of the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection & The EU RIP Alliance
- e) The hearing will take place on Wednesday 28 February from 12.30pm to 14.00pm at the European Parliament, Altiero Spinelli building, in Room ASP1H1, Rue Wiertz, Brussels
- f) Interviews with representatives of sponsoring organisations can be arranged through Florence Berteletti Kemp on behalf of the EU RIP Alliance Tel: +0032 2 238 53 63

Statistical Sources

¹ UK Fire Statistics 2004, Department of Office of National Statistics

² The ASPECT Consortium. Tobacco or Health in the European Union. Past, present and future. European Commission, 2004.

³ RIP Cigarettes: State of discussion in the EU, 2nd International Conference on Fire "Safer" Cigarettes. Boston, 2006

⁴ ASTM 2187 www.astm.org

⁵ Smokers reactions to Reduced Ignition Propensity cigarettes, O'Connor et al *Tob. Control* 2006;15;45-49

⁶ Tobacco Manufacturers Briefing, TMA January 2007