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Commercial Tobacco's Impact: Costly for California's American Indian/Alaska Native Communities

Tribal communities throughout California have grown or harvested tobacco and/or other plants for ceremonial or medicinal purposes for several centuries. The tobacco industry has exploited these traditions contributing to Tribal communities having the highest commercial tobacco use rates in California. Many Tribal communities are working to restore traditional tobacco practices and reduce commercial tobacco abuse.

The Impacts of the Tobacco Industry in Tribal Communities:

- **Social Costs:** Commercial tobacco use has eroded sacred practices and community cohesion by replacing traditional tobacco in ceremonial use and uses appropriating symbols and Tribal imagery (e.g. Natural American Spirits brand depicts an Indian smoking a pipe).¹
- Financial costs:** Money spent treating commercial tobacco-related illnesses diverts financial resources away from essential needs such as education, substance use treatment, housing, and other services.²
- Fire risks:** Cigarette filters and e-cigarettes have been linked to destructive wildfires.³ Tribal lands, often in remote areas, are prone to these destructive wildfires caused by combustible commercial tobacco products. In addition to the financial costs, there is a cultural loss from damage to ancestral homelands and destruction of artifacts resulting from tobacco-related fires.

Tribal communities are disproportionately impacted by tobacco:

- Tobacco-related diseases like cardiovascular disease and lung cancer are the leading causes of death among American Indians/Alaska Natives.⁴
- American Indians have the highest cigarette smoking rate compared to all other racial/ethnic groups in California.⁵



- 19.7% of American Indian high school students in California use tobacco, exceeding the statewide average of 12.7%.⁶

Tribal Community Projects are building capacity and developing leadership from within. Recent progress:

- Tribes and Tribal-serving organizations have formed coalitions to educate and engage their youth through activities including, art contests, digital storytelling events, social media challenges, and community education events.

- Tribal youth are engaging leaders from Tribal council to the California State Legislature to advocate for the health of their communities and future.
- Tribes are developing smoke free policies in their places of business to protect their patrons and staff.
- Tribes have developed smoke-free housing policies and pledges that include single dwelling and multiunit homes, including common areas, balconies, and patios.
- Communities are developing interventions that incorporate traditional values and knowledge for their healing and protective properties.

REFERENCES

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- 5 California Department of Public Health California Tobacco Control Program. CALIFORNIA TOBACCO FACTS and FIGURES 2019. www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDC/CTCB/CDPH%20Document%20Library/ResearchandEvaluation/FactsandFigures/CATobaccoFactsandFigures2019.pdf.
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