

SLOW BURN



EVERY YEAR SMOULDERING OR DISCARDED CIGARETTES CAUSE MORE THAN 4500 FIRES IN AUSTRALIA. A FURTHER 78 900 FIRES ARE ALSO SUSPECTED OF INVOLVING CIGARETTES.

ACCORDING TO a report prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, at least 7 per cent of all bushfires are started by dropped cigarettes and a study of National Coroners Information System records between 2000 and 2006 found 67 deaths were linked to fires started by cigarettes.

In an attempt to address the problem, Australian authorities have begun investigating whether reduced fire risk (RFR) cigarettes could be part of the answer.

Unlike conventional cigarettes that will continue smouldering unassisted, RFR cigarettes are designed to self-extinguish more easily if forgotten or left unsmoked.

They are particularly effective in reducing the number of house fires started by smokers falling asleep in bed or forgetting burning cigarettes near flammable clothing or other materials.

RFR cigarettes produce a similar smoking experience to normal cigarettes, but are usually less densely packed or have lower levels of burn additives like citrate in the paper that make them more likely to self-extinguish.

International studies have shown that smokers are unlikely to choose RFR cigarettes over conventional brands and education campaigns have failed to significantly reduce the number of fires started.



There is apparently also little incentive for tobacco companies to make their products less combustible without being required to do so by law.

As the national body charged with consumer protection, the ACCC is looking at the options for introducing a mandatory standard that would require all cigarettes sold or produced in this country to meet RFR guidelines.

Moves in this direction are already well advanced in a number of American states and Canada with regulations requiring cigarettes to meet RFR standards in place. The European Union is also at the early stages of developing regulations for the production and marketing of 'fire safe' cigarettes.

Australian fire authorities have long campaigned for all cigarettes to be RFR compliant. A number of issues are still being considered, such as the additional costs versus the real benefits of requiring all manufacturers to change their products.

At this stage it appears unlikely that a mandatory standard would apply to other tobacco products, such as cigars. With governments around the world moving towards mandating the use of RFR standards in the cigarettes they sell and produce, Australia would be looking to match those overseas requirements to reduce any trade difficulties for imported cigarettes.

The ACCC is currently consulting on the issue and a draft regulatory impact statement is available on the ACCC website.

If the Australian Government goes ahead with a mandatory standard, administered by the ACCC, it is likely that manufacturers would have 18 months to ensure all products complied. It would also be accompanied by a product safety awareness campaign to inform smokers of the changes and encourage them to buy specially marked packs as soon as they come on to the market. ●

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