

September 9, 2008

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OREGON PARTNERSHIP SUPPORTS LAWSUIT TO STOP SALES OF ALCOHOLIC ENERGY DRINK

(Portland, Oregon) In hopes of reducing the incidence of underage drinking in the state, Oregon Partnership has enthusiastically supported a suit filed by the Center for Science in the Public Interest against MillerCoors Brewing Company.

The lawsuit filed yesterday is asking the Superior Court of the District of Columbia to stop MillerCoors from selling its alcoholic energy drink, Sparks.

The product contains more alcohol than regular beer in addition to unapproved additives, including the stimulants caffeine and guarana.

"Anheuser-Busch already got the message by getting rid of its alcoholic energy drinks, and we feel MillerCoors should do the same," said Pete Schulberg, Communications Director for Oregon Partnership. "These products are especially dangerous for the young people who are the major consumers of energy drinks."

CSPI points out that according to a 2007 Wake Forest University study, drinkers of caffeinated alcoholic drinks are more likely to binge drink, ride with an intoxicated driver, become injured, or be taken advantage of sexually than drinkers of non-caffeinated alcoholic drinks.

Sparks contain 6 to 7 percent alcohol by volume, as opposed to regular beer, which typically has 4 or 5 percent alcohol. MillerCoors plans to release Sparks Red, which will contain 8 percent alcohol.

Sparks' web site and guerilla marketing appeal to young consumers, according to CSPI. The web site offers a recipe for a drink called a "Lunchbox," consisting of half Miller beer and half Sparks, and elsewhere, the site proposes consuming Sparks for breakfast alongside omelets.

"Mix alcohol and stimulants with a young person's sense of invincibility and you have a recipe for disaster," said George A. Hacker, director of CSPI's alcohol policies project. "Sparks is a drink designed to mask feelings of drunkenness and to encourage people to keep drinking past the point at which they otherwise would have stopped. The end result is more drunk driving, more injuries, and more sexual assaults."

According to a 2006 study, the stimulants in these products do not reduce alcohol's negative effects on motor skills and reaction times but do impair people's perception of intoxication. As a result, drinkers may engage in risky behavior, such as driving, because they feel less drunk but in reality are too intoxicated to get behind wheel.

CSPI's lawsuit also contends that it is illegal to use caffeine, guarana, ginseng, and taurine in alcoholic beverages. The federal agency with primary responsibility for regulating alcoholic beverages, the Treasury Department's Tax and Trade Bureau, says alcoholic beverages may contain only ingredients considered General Recognized as Safe, or GRAS, by the Food and Drug Administration. But the FDA has given only very narrow approval for caffeine and guarana—with no allowance for alcoholic drinks—and no approval for ginseng in any food or beverage. Taurine is only approved for use in chicken feed, not human food.

In February, CSPI notified Anheuser-Busch and Miller of its intent to sue both companies over caffeinated alcoholic drinks. In June, Anheuser-Busch entered into separate agreements with CSPI and 11 state attorneys general in which the brewer agreed to take caffeine and other unapproved additives out of its two alcoholic energy drinks, Bud Extra and Tilt.