STATEMENT OF
KENTUCKY ACTION
BEFORE THE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
OCTOBER 12-13, 2000
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Kentucky ACTION appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement to the World Health Organization and to confirm our strong support of the WHO’s efforts to reduce the addiction, disease and death caused by tobacco use. There is no question that unless action is taken nationally, regionally and globally, the devastating diseases that tobacco products cause will remain of epidemic proportions for decades to come.

Kentucky ACTION represents the tobacco and health views of over sixty organizations throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Kentucky ACTION’S steering committee is comprised of the local affiliates of the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Lung Association. We believe that, living and working in one of the most tobacco dependent states in America, we can provide the WHO with some insights on how the WHO might work with tobacco growers and policy makers that will allow growers to reduce their dependencies on tobacco, while WHO moves forward with a strong effort to reduce the disease, death and addiction caused by tobacco use.

As the WHO moves forward with the Framework Convention, it will undoubtedly be confronted with issues related to the potential economic hardship that will be faced by tobacco growers, their families and their communities. The WHO will undoubtedly hear from ‘special interests’ that the Framework Convention should not proceed. However, we see the Framework Convention as an opportunity to address complex issues and problems facing tobacco dependent regions, and an opportunity to work toward solving these problems with creative, productive, and long-term solutions.

Tobacco is grown on 60,000 small farms in one hundred nineteen out of one hundred twenty counties in Kentucky. It is the number one agricultural cash crop, bringing between $700 and $900 million per year, making it accountable for nearly one quarter of all agricultural cash receipts. For generations, Kentucky has put such an emphasis on and has so identified itself with tobacco production that tobacco is not just considered a crop, but an entire culture that effects the economic security of not only farmers and their families, but entire rural communities – from the general store to local businesses, to hospitals and even churches which are dependent upon tithes and gifts.

Not surprisingly, the health burden in Kentucky caused by tobacco use is devastating. Nearly one quarter of all annual deaths in Kentucky are directly attributable to long term tobacco use. Kentucky ranks first out of all states in the United States in the number of both adult and youth smokers, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kentuckians spend approximately $1 billion annually treating tobacco related disease. Tobacco “addiction” in Kentucky means much more than just smokers who are unable to quit. Because of the importance of tobacco as an agricultural commodity,
Kentucky elected officials and public policy makers have been consistently reluctant to address tobacco as a health issue.

In spite of the tobacco companies’ aggressive efforts to move tobacco production and manufacturing out of the United States and into other countries in order to reduce costs and avoid regulatory controls, tobacco companies continue to maintain a stranglehold on Kentucky – on smokers, on our elected officials and public policy makers, on agriculture leaders, on farmers, on rural communities. The most important thing that tobacco companies actually get from Kentucky and other US growers is not tobacco, but thousands of farmers and their families who can lobby at State Capitols and in Congress on behalf of the companies’ political agenda.

For example, in 1994, a bill was introduced in the Kentucky General Assembly that would have increased the state excise tax on cigarettes by three cents. Had it succeeded, this legislation would have raised the cigarette tax to a total of six cents per pack, with every penny of the increase going back into rural tobacco dependent communities for the sole purpose of helping wean tobacco growers and their families away from their dependence on tobacco. The funds would have provided financial assistance for alternative on-farm enterprises through low interest loans, and would have begun to establish a marketing infrastructure for other crops. Although this newly generated revenue would have gone directly into the farmers’ pockets, the tobacco companies successfully convinced the growers that the tax was not in their best interest. With company support and guidance, the farmers staged a Boston Tea Party (patterned after the pre-revolutionary war protest by new Americans opposed to a British-imposed tax on tea) where they threw bales of Kentucky burley into the Kentucky River. A media campaign, encouraged and financed by the companies, announced that Kentucky growers would “rather fight than switch (crops).”

More recently, when strong regulatory controls over tobacco products were being debated in Washington, D.C., the tobacco companies financed a well-orchestrated protest by US growers to “keep FDA off the farm.” The strategy behind this effort was to perpetuate grossly inaccurate information, as well as to inspire fear among US growers that government agents would soon be coming onto their farms to impose impossible and unnecessary controls and requirements that would ultimately put the farmers out of business.

Kentucky ACTION has worked hard over the past several years to develop and maintain a working relationship with Kentucky growers. We have successfully exposed tobacco industry tactics as they relate to both public health and farming issues, and have begun to work together with growers and agricultural leaders to implement public policy that will protect both public health and lessen dependence upon tobacco. Because of the alliance that has been established between the public health community and the agriculture community in Kentucky, it is unlikely that today you would find anyone in Kentucky who would question the need for significant changes in the way in which this industry conducts its business. The last few years has seen some significant changes in the way in which Kentuckians look at the tobacco issue and, while we still have a long way to go in
changing the environment, we respectfully provide the following comments, ideas, and suggestions for your consideration.

1. It is important that the WHO keep focused on the significant problems associated with tobacco use and assist in the implementation of policies and programs that will work towards the reduction of tobacco use and the diseases associated with their use. Even in a tobacco growing state, where we must deal with the political, economic and social realities of tobacco, we must not lose sight of public health goals and objectives. We may have to take a different route to accomplish these goals, but our ultimate goals are the same as every other state in the United States.

2. It is important to realize that tobacco is grown in many countries, although only a handful make up the major countries of production. In addition to farmers there are thousands of people living in tobacco dependent regions and communities that depend upon tobacco money to feed their children and pay their bills. These people must also be considered as we move forward to accomplish our goals.

3. It is possible to enter into discussion and dialogue with tobacco growers in an effort to find common ground and to work together to develop a process for short term and long-term change.

4. While tobacco growers are dependent upon the tobacco industry to purchase their crop, it is inaccurate and counter-productive to lump both growers and companies into the same category and label it the “tobacco industry.” The interests of the companies and the interests of the growers are often grossly incompatible. Tobacco companies do not have the growers’ best interest in mind when they take aggressive measures to use these farmers as pawns in their political strategy. The companies ability to manipulate the growers into standing in the way of meaningful public health policy has not only had a negative impact on public health, but has also left growers with few options for reducing their dependency on tobacco. In fact, while the tobacco companies’ profit margins have increased in the US (now close to fifty cents on the dollar), the tobacco growers’ percentage has declined to about two cents on the dollar. The profit margin for the companies on the world market is even higher, while the amount that growers actually get in developing countries may be even lower than those of the US farmer. Not only should we be looking at the tobacco companies’ business practices in the US but we should also be looking closely, from a global perspective, at what these companies are doing to tobacco producers.

5. A report issued by the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association entitled “False Friends – The US Cigarette Companies’ Betrayal of American Tobacco Farmers” provides us with a clear picture of how the US tobacco companies have used the tobacco farmer for political and economic gain in the past, abandoning them in the present when those farmers no longer serve their purpose. While there is still a strong connection between the tobacco growers and the tobacco industry, many growers
in the US are finally beginning to stand up for themselves, beginning to question
the true motivations of the companies, and even providing leadership for change.
Many tobacco farmers in the tobacco producing states acknowledge privately and
in some cases publicly that tobacco is a major cause of disease and addiction.
They realize that the tobacco industry has targeted children and adolescents with
seductive advertising, fought off regulatory standards that would have required
tobacco products to be labeled more clearly, and prevented the research and
development efforts that could have resulted in the removal and or reduction of
many toxins now known to be associated with disease and addiction. There is an
urgent need to more closely examine how US and other tobacco conglomerates
are using tobacco growers throughout the world to benefit their own financial and
political purposes.

It is important to accept and understand that there is no one solution to reducing a
farmer and his community’s dependency on tobacco. Tobacco will be grown well into
the future. The question is, under what circumstances will it be produced,
manufactured, sold and marketed. How will effective and enforceable production,
manufacturing and marketing standards be established by national governments as a
part of a global effort to protect public health? How will this global effort succeed in
light of the increasing economic and political clout of the tobacco companies
throughout the world?

In the United States, health groups and tobacco farm organizations are working
together to find both short and long term solutions. We believe it is critically
important to expand this dialogue to include health organizations and tobacco
growers at the international level.

Some areas of common ground here in the U.S include:

1. The importance of strong, complementary federal, state and local laws, which
guarantee that tobacco products are not marketed, advertised or otherwise made
available to children.

2. That there should be strong regulatory authority over the manufacture, sale,
distribution, labeling and marketing of tobacco products, both domestic and
imported. Such regulations should have as their goal the protection of public
health and the assurance that users of tobacco products are provided with full and
complete information about the products they are using. In order to accomplish
this goal, industry information and research should be made available for public
review.

3. That global initiatives should include establishing requirements for pesticide and
other quality agricultural controls for tobacco production.
4. That any increase in federal or state excise taxes should include monies earmarked for public health initiatives, as well as assisting farmers in addressing their economic dependence upon tobacco.

5. That a tobacco production control program, which limits supply and which sets a minimum purchase price, is in the best interest of the public health community and the tobacco producer community.

6. That tobacco quota holders and tobacco lease holders should be given the opportunity for voluntary buy outs to assist those who want to retire from the tobacco growing business.

7. That there be greater cooperation between the tobacco growers and the public health community in seeking ways to reduce the burden of disease and death caused by tobacco, while working to lessen growers dependence upon tobacco.

Respectfully submitted by:

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