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Tobacco-process tests disclosed

Product safer, producer says

BY CHIP JONES
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

A small Petersburg company made a big splash in tobacco and health circles yesterday by disclosing clinical tests of a new kind of tobacco processing that could remove some of the most dangerous, cancer-causing compounds in cigarette smoke.

Star Tobacco & Pharmaceutical Inc. said it has gotten approval from the Food and Drug Administration to begin testing smoking-cessation products made from "a novel sophisticated proprietary process" that would eliminate a cancer-causing compound — nitrosamines — found in tobacco leaf and second-hand smoke.

Nitrosamines are considered one of the leading causes of lung cancer, which killed 158,000 Americans last year. The nitrogen-based compounds form when flue-cured tobacco turns from green to gold.

Health officials reacted cautiously to the news of Star's experiments under way at the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals' Department of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutics.

"We have to see whether the FDA can substantiate the health claims that are being made for this product," said Dr. Ronald Davis, director of the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit.

There are at least 43 cancer-causing chemicals in tobacco smoke, Davis said, "so removal of some of them certainly doesn't solve the problem."

But Dr. John Slade, a leading smoking researcher, said he thinks Star may be onto something.

"Here is a tobacco company really innovating and asking the right questions to modify tobacco," said Slade, of St. Peter's Medical Center in New Brunswick, N.J.

Unlike most previous tobacco company research, which has been kept secret, Slade said, "They are going through conventional channels about getting their product to market, using the FDA to protect consumers."

If the research proves Star can eliminate many cancer-causing agents in tobacco smoke, Slade said, "It will likely make a public health contribution."

FDA officials declined to comment on Star's disclosure.

By revealing its development plans yesterday, Star appeared to be positioning itself to operate under an FDA umbrella. Only in recent months did the company add "Pharmaceutical" to its name.

In the proposed \$368.5 billion national tobacco settlement, the nation's top tobacco companies agreed to give the FDA the authority to require the introduction of "less hazardous tobacco products." Congress is expected to consider the legislation early next year.

Until now, Star has been known as a maker of such specialty cigarettes as Buz and Gunsmoke. It opened in 1990 in the old Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. facilities.

Now the privately owned company with 120 employees appears poised to take advantage of a federally mandated market for "less hazardous" cigarettes.

Star also is positioning itself to tap into a growing smoking-cessation business, which could be funded under a new tobacco law.

"We've been working on it over two years," Star chairman Samuel Sears said yesterday. He would not reveal the cost of the research and development effort, except to say "it's in the millions."

Sears also wouldn't disclose the secret of his nitrosamine-removal process, described in a news release as "a unique, high speed method of 'sterilizing' the tobacco leaf during its curing process."



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Star claimed its process "does not affect the taste, color or nicotine content of the tobacco leaf."

The MCV tests involve preliminary tests of a new mint-flavored gum — called "Gumsmoke" — which contains pulverized pieces of the newly processed tobacco.

Star also is developing a tobacco-based lozenge called "Goldsmoke."

Both products will be free of cancer-causing agents in tobacco, while mirroring the taste of cigarettes, the company said.

Since most smokers try, but fail, to kick their habits, Star also is proposing a "safer cigarette" made with its new process.

The company said it is in "serious discussions" with two major drug companies to license some products. It also said it's "holding serious discussions with one of the five major tobacco manufacturing companies" about global licensing of its "high speed tobacco processing method."

Sears would not disclose the names of any of the other companies.

But the company did vow to use only Virginia-grown tobacco and to keep growing in Petersburg.

John C. Maxwell Jr., a tobacco industry analyst at Davenport & Co., said other cigarette companies have talked for years about making the kind of product Star touted yesterday.

"They're all mumbling about making a safer cigarette, but when you get down to it, the problem is, you don't know what's in it causing the problem," Maxwell said.

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