

NEWS

No surprise, the tanning bed industry sees a friend in Donald Trump

Barrett Newkirk The Desert Sun

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The Obama years have scorched the indoor tanning industry.

The first hit came when tanning customers were singled out with a new 10 percent tax as part of the president's health reform bill. The tax along with greater awareness of the cancer risk associated with too much sun exposure have helped decimate tanning businesses. One trade group says about 10,000 tanning salons have closed across the country since 2010, eliminating up to 100,000 jobs and cutting the industry by half.

Those who are left think incoming President Donald Trump can help reverse that trend, starting with dropping the tax as part of his steadfast promise to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

"This is the first time in a long time that this industry has really seen anything to be optimistic about," said John Overstreet, executive director of the Indoor Tanning Association, which represents companies covering all aspects of the tanning world, including salons, lotion makers and bed manufacturers.

A straightforward repeal of the Affordable Care Act, commonly called Obamacare, would kill the tax. But Overstreet said legislative maneuvering in Congress makes it more complicated. Taxes tied to the law could be left intact or be eliminated with a separate action.

"What I've been telling my members is people that know aren't talking and people that are talking don't know," he said.

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The tax, which salons tack on to customer bills and then pay to the federal government, was included in the Affordable Care Act in an attempt to discourage tanning-bed use, much like the thinking behind cigarette taxes. Critics have cast the tax as an example of "nanny state" health policy and point out that it has fallen short of revenue estimates.

A 2015 bill to end the tax never made it out of a U.S. House committee. When the Republican-led Congress sent President Barack Obama a bill to repeal the Affordable Care Act, the industry took it as a sign that lawmakers were still on its side. Obama, of course, vetoed the bill.

The businesses are fighting more than the tax. The Obama administration proposed new regulations in 2015 that would bar anyone under 18 from using a tanning bed and require adults to sign forms every six months acknowledging the safety risks. This followed rules that took effect in 2014 that included stronger warning labels on tanning beds.

Overstreet doubted the Food and Drug Administration would implement the new regulations during the presidential transition and will instead wait on guidance from the Trump administration. An FDA spokeswoman said the agency is still reviewing public feedback and cannot comment on future action.

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Trump has not announced his pick to head the FDA, although he has reportedly met with possible nominees with experience in the world of technology rather than medicine.

Overstreet said the health risks of tanning beds have been exaggerated by groups likely working with good intentions but benefiting from deep pockets to help spread their message. The industry supports moderate tanning without burning, he said.

Supervised exposure to ultraviolet light, known as phototherapy, is considered effective treatment for some conditions, but doctors will tell people to limit their exposure to UV light as much as possible, whether it's coming from the sun or a tanning bed. The American Academy of Dermatology Association supports the proposed FDA rules and would like to see the government go further by banning indoor tanning equipment not used for a medical purpose.

For anyone considering a tanning bed to up vitamin D levels, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the safest route is through the food you eat.

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