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Tobacco industry scoffs at Clinton plan

COLUMBIA (AP) — One tobacco warehouse owner says President Clinton's proposals to ban brand-name cigarette ads at sporting events will spell disaster for the president's party.

"It's going to hurt Democrats in the South. It'll push them away," said Walt Abbott, co-owner of the Bright Leaf warehouse in Darlington.

Clinton said Thursday he has told the Food and Drug Administration to write regulations to keep smoking and chewing tobacco away from youths.

"If the goal is to crack down on teen smoking, I don't know why they're picking on us," said Jim Hunter, president of Darlington Raceway.

Hunter said less than 2 percent of the audience at a typical race at his NASCAR track is younger than 21. Tobacco advertising has been linked to NASCAR for decades; the Winston Cup is the circuit's premier racing series.

"It's scary," he said of Clinton's proposals.

Hunter said that while NASCAR has grown so popular that it probably could replace the Winston sponsorship, people in racing don't want to think about the possibility because of the long-standing relationship.

"I think that's part of this sport's heritage. We believe in loyalty, and that may not be politically correct today," Hunter said.

Along with the ban on brand-name ads at sporting events, Clinton wants to ban all cigarette vending machines and require the tobacco industry to fund a \$100 million education campaign to discourage kids from smoking.

"The government is trying to regulate us tobacco farmers out of business," Lynchburg tobacco grower Phil Phillips said. Tobacco is South Carolina's most valuable cash crop.

Abbott said turning young people away from tobacco might be more difficult than just ending advertising. "The more you tell a kid not to do something, the more curious they get," he said.

Abbott and Howard Schmitt, manager at the West Columbia branch of Eli Witt Co., a tobacco wholesaler, said the vending machine ban won't mean much because most are in bars that only admit people 21 or older.

"There are very few vending machines out in South Carolina," Schmitt said. "It's sort of a moot issue in this state."

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