

... The right tax

WENDELL FORD and Kentucky's congressional delegation are dreaming if they think their feelings about the tobacco tax will prevail. "I just feel a lot of strategy can be developed" to prevent the tobacco industry from being badly hurt, Sen. Ford told *Courier-Journal* reporter Mike Brown.

But the rest of the nation does not share Kentucky's fondness for the tobacco industry. Tobacco, after all, is the only product that kills people when used exactly as it's intended.

There are two strong arguments for increasing the tax on tobacco to pay for health care reform:

1. A smoker runs up more medical bills than a non-smoker — \$329 more a year, according to the Office of Technology Assessment. If that cost were to be covered by a tax, it would translate into an additional cost of about \$1.50 per pack of cigarettes.

2. The federal government shouldn't protect Kentucky's economy by keeping Americans smok-

ing. It shouldn't aid in the killing of 434,000 Americans a year.

Predictably, lobbying against the tax is centered on job losses. The Tobacco Growers' Information Committee ran an ad in *Roll Call* this week headlined, "Putting 14,000 Farmers Out of Work Won't Solve the Health Care Crisis."

Unfortunately, by a cold accounting, it just might help. The number 14,000 may be an exaggeration, but just suppose it's correct:

✓ A 50-cent-per-pack tax increase would raise \$7.2 billion per year — the equivalent of \$514,000 for each of those 14,000 jobs lost. The federal government could share that money with unemployed farmers, help them convert their farms to other uses — and still come out way ahead.

✓ Economists expect a 50-cent tax would lower consumption by 2.5 million smokers, which would mean 625,000 fewer people would die prematurely from smoking.

Which is of greater value: 45 lives or one job? Most folks wouldn't find this a hard decision.