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Group objects to smoking ban

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TRA: Plan would be bad for business

A ban on indoor smoking in public places, part of a sweeping OSHA proposal, will threaten jobs, business and revenues in restaurants and bars if implemented, according to the Tennessee Restaurant Association.

But an official with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in Washington, D.C., says the TRA and OSHA are looking at the Indoor Air Quality regulation from very

different perspectives.

"Smoking is a central issue that seems to fire up a lot of people on both sides of the issue," said project officer Debra Janes, a health scientist with OSHA's Health Standards Program. "It's for protection of non-smoking workers. Many of them interface directly with smokers. When they serve drinks and serve food, their focus is on the clientele. Our

focus is on the workers."

If approved, the proposal would be a national standard and would protect workers from all types of indoor air pollution in public buildings across America, said Janes. It also offers design alternatives to typical building systems and better plans for the operation and maintenance of ventilation systems.

It's an unnecessary plan, say many

in the restaurant industry. A recently-released statewide survey of 302 full-service restaurants and bars/taverns conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide for the Tennessee Restaurant Association found:

■ 78 percent of bar/tavern owners and 48 percent of restaurant managers/owners believe a smoking ban

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would mean a 15 percent or greater loss in revenues.

■ 65 percent of bar/tavern owners and 73 percent of restaurant owners/managers predict employee layoffs if the regulation takes effect.

■ 94 percent of bar/tavern owners and 75 percent of restaurant owners/managers say that policies regarding customer smoking should be made by the establishment itself and not by the government.

"I think there are ways of doing it without government telling you to regulate it," said longtime Knoxville restaurateur Bill Regas. "I think we're smart enough to figure it out."

TRA executive vice president Ronnie Hart agreed, saying that most restaurants have smoking sections for the 25 percent of Tennesseans who smoke, and non-smoking sections for those who don't.

"It seems to be working," he said. "There's been no big uprising of our customers."

But Janes contends her division receives complaints from restaurant workers, as well as bartenders and casino employees.

"We get complaints about indoor air all the time, and without

a standard it's kind of hard to address the issues," said Janes. "It is a major issue and kind of an in-your-face type issue."

OSHA proposed the regulations in April 1994, and acknowledges it has received opposition from hospitality industries in several states.

"We asked them for documentation that the rule would have an adverse effect on the hospitality sector," said Janes. "A lot of people have opinions, but where is the documentation? ... They may have a temporary loss in the quarter, but would recover any losses by the end of the year."

The TRA's Hart said, "I can tell you, this will impact sales in our business. ... If I'm a smoker (and) I want to sit at a place and have a cup of coffee, or have a drink, or have dessert, at least a percentage of those people aren't going to stay."

"It'll probably be one of those things the public would get used to. It will still have an impact on our bottom line."

A decision may be slow since OSHA, which falls under the U.S. Department of Labor, is waiting on President Clinton to name a successor to Secretary Robert Reich, who has announced he is leaving the Cabinet.

"We will have to see what the new leadership intends to do," said Janes.

"There's change coming in the near future."