

Dear Member of Parliament,

European Tobacco Harm Reduction Advocates (ETHRA) is a group of 22 grassroots consumer associations in 16 European countries which support the public health approach of tobacco harm reduction, where people are encouraged to switch from high-risk products like cigarettes to low-risk products like e-cigarettes. ETHRA represents approximately 27 million consumers of safer nicotine products across Europe and is supported by experts in the field of tobacco control and nicotine research¹. We are ex-smokers who have experience of using safer nicotine products to quit smoking and to remain smoke-free. ETHRA is a voluntary organisation with no industry conflicts of interest – see our Transparency Register entry: 354946837243-73.

We are dismayed to learn that on 21 April 2021 the Council of Ministers approved a highly controversial proposal to ban the sale of flavourings for e-cigarettes which would take effect from 1 July 2022. In July of last year, we wrote to State Secretary for Health Mr Paul Blokhuis to outline our grave concerns over this proposal – our letter is attached. The rationale given for this proposal is the protection of youth, however, it seems that no consideration has been given to the 400,000 consumers of vapour products in the Netherlands, nor the perverse consequences a flavour ban would have on adult smokers – which we highlighted in our letter.

E-cigarettes are substitutes for combustible tobacco and are used almost exclusively by smokers and ex-smokers as a means to quit smoking and reduce their consumption of combustible tobacco. Recent data from Special Eurobarometer 506 found that complete smoking cessation among current vapers (e-cigarette users) rose by 121% between 2017 and 2020 - from 14% to 31% - and that the vast majority of these vapers used fruit or sweet flavours². These data are highly relevant as the current flavour ban proposals would eliminate the products hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens are using to quit smoking and remain smoke free.

Vaping is a successful tool for smoking cessation because adult smokers find it appealing: having a wide variety of flavours is an intrinsic part of this success³. The importance of flavours was highlighted during the public consultation for the flavour ban proposal, when an unprecedented number of submissions were received objecting to the ban⁴. A petition against the flavour ban, presented to parliament by Acvoda, the Dutch consumer association and partner of ETHRA, received almost 20000 signatures⁵. To date, the concerns of consumers, the people who will be most affected by a ban, have been completely ignored.

Concerns that a flavour ban will increase smoking are well founded and should be heeded. This seems to have been the case in San Francisco where a flavour ban came into effect in

¹ European Tobacco Harm Reduction Advocates (ETHRA). Available at: <https://ethra.co/>

² European Commission. February 2021. Special Eurobarometer 506: Attitudes of Europeans towards tobacco and electronic cigarettes. Kantar Belgium. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2240>

³ Gravely S, Cummings KM, Hammond D, et al. The association of e-cigarette flavors with satisfaction, enjoyment, and trying to quit or stay abstinent from smoking among regular adult vapers from Canada and the United States: Findings from the 2018 ITC four country smoking and vaping survey. *Nicotine Tob Res* 2021;22(10):1831–1841

⁴ Overheid NL. February 2021. Regulation of e-cigarette flavors consultation. Available at: <https://internetconsultatie.nl/smaakjes>

⁵ nieuws.nl. February 2021. 19.000 handtekeningen tegen verbod smaakjes e-sigaret. Available at: <https://nieuws.nl/economie/20210201/19-000-handtekeningen-tegen-verbod-smaakjes-e-sigaret/>

July 2018. An analysis by Friedman⁶ found that “*San Francisco’s ban on flavored tobacco product sales was associated with increased smoking among minor high school students relative to other school districts.*”

The Netherlands has set ambitious goals to reduce smoking rates and as tobacco harm reduction advocates, we share these goals. However, we must stress that banning flavours for e-cigarettes is likely to have the opposite effect. Parliamentarians must be aware that flavoured vaping products are a direct competitor to smoking. Banning or severely restricting a rival product protects the cigarette trade and keeps people smoking.

Kind regards,

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<https://ethra.co>

⁶ Friedman AS. A Difference-in-Differences Analysis of Youth Smoking and a Ban on Sales of Flavored Tobacco Products in San Francisco, California. *JAMA Pediatr*. Published online May 24, 2021. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0922