

No tobacco product is safe - U.S. surgeon general

June 3rd, 2003

By Lisa Richwine

Reuters News

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Reuters) - The U.S. surgeon general said on Tuesday no tobacco products had been proven less risky than smoking, as lawmakers debated whether chewing tobacco or "safer" cigarettes might cut tobacco-related deaths. A hearing by a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee focused largely on whether smokeless tobacco is a better alternative to cigarettes. "We simply do not have enough scientific evidence to conclude that any tobacco product, including smokeless tobacco, is a means of reducing the risks of cigarette smoking," Surgeon General Richard Carmona said. "At this time, any public health recommendation that positions smokeless tobacco as a safer substitute for cigarettes or as a quitting aid would be premature and dangerous," he added. Cigarettes cause lung cancer, and smoking is blamed for more than 400,000 U.S. deaths per year. Smokeless tobacco has been linked to mouth cancer. Carmona said evidence suggested smokeless tobacco "is a gateway to smoking." U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company, the main unit of UST Inc. (UST.N), has asked the Federal Trade Commission to consider a public meeting on whether it is appropriate to advertise harm-reduction claims for smokeless products. The company said there was a consensus that smokeless tobacco was less risky than smoking. "Many researchers have expressed the opinion that use of smokeless tobacco is significantly less harmful than cigarette smoke," said U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Executive Vice President Richard Verheij. UST "believes it is crucial that this information be made available to adult smokers," he said. FTC Chairman Timothy Muris said the commission would review advertising for potential reduced-risk tobacco products on a case-by-case basis, with the goal of making sure information is "truthful and not misleading." Some Democrats said they worried that promoting any product as "safer" than traditional cigarettes could lead the public to discount the risks and actually increase smoking. "If we send the message to Americans that it's OK to chew tobacco, we will be doing harm," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat. Some cigarette makers already have introduced what they call safer cigarettes. Tobacco giant Philip Morris USA, a unit of Altria Group Inc. (MO.N), is developing what it hopes will be a less harmful cigarette smoking system and filter. The company is pushing Congress to give the Food and Drug Administration authority to regulate tobacco and to determine when products can be promoted as reduced-risk. "In the absence of FDA authority in this area, we are forced into making a difficult choice between making claims that haven't been validated by a government

agency ... and not providing smokers with information that may be helpful to them," Mike Szymanczyk, chairman and chief executive of Philip Morris USA, said in testimony for a separate hearing before the House Government Reform Committee.