

Energy drink makers on defensive at US Senate hearing (Update)

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The multi-billion-dollar global energy drink industry joined forces on Capitol Hill on Wednesday to fight off growing claims that their caffeine-rich products are hazardous to young people's health.

Senior executives from Monster Beverage, Red Bull and Rockstar told the US Senate's Commerce Committee that they do not pitch their drinks at children, despite their aggressive use of social media and sponsorship of action sports.

"Monster is, and always has been, committed to ensuring that all of the ingredients in its energy drinks, including caffeine, are safe and in regulatory compliance for their intended use," Monster Beverage chief executive Rodney Sacks said.

Energy drinks are a small but growing segment in the non-alcoholic beverage industry in the United States, but health experts have expressed concern that their caffeine content poses risks in youngsters as heart arrhythmia and higher blood pressure.

Last month, the American Medical Association called for a ban on the marketing of energy drinks to children and teenagers, said Senator Jay Rockefeller, the commerce committee chairman, at the start of the hearing.

He stated that in the first six months of this year, poison control centers in the United States received about 1,500 reports involving energy

drinks, "more than half of which involved children under the age of 18."

Sitting in the hearing room was Wendy Crossland, who in October 2012 sued Monster Beverage after her daughter Anais Fournier died in December 2011 after consuming two 24-ounce cans of Monster energy drink within 24 hours.

The cause of death, according to the girls' doctors in Maryland, was caffeine toxicity.

In his thick South African accent, Monster Beverage's Sacks argued that, at 160 milligrams, a 16-ounce can of Monster Energy - its best-selling product - had just under half the caffeine of a similar-sized cup of Starbucks coffee.

"The safety of caffeine and other ingredients in Monster energy drinks is well established by an overwhelming body of generally accepted literature published by reputable third parties," he said.

He also stated that Monster's primary demographic is young adult males, and that it "does not focus its brand initiatives on young teenagers" - although it sponsors a so-called Monster Army to support and develop teenaged athletes.

Red Bull North America vice president Amy Taylor said Red Bull products, first launched in Europe in 1987 and now sold in more than 165 countries, are sophisticated premium beverages aimed squarely at adults.

She used Wednesday's hearing to announce that it would limit to 80 milligrams per 8.4 ounces the amount of caffeine in its drinks, and that it would never use child- or teen-oriented characters in its animated "Red Bull gives you wings" advertisements.

But she was caught off-guard when Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts drew attention to a post on Red Bull's Instagram feed that recommended that consumers wash down a sleeping pill with a can of Red Bull and then "let the battle begin."

"It shouldn't have been messaged," she said.

Rockstar co-owner Janet Weiner said she felt "victimized" by the negative attention being given to energy drinks, but promised - as did Sacks and Taylor - to review her company's social media sites and pull down any posts that encourage unhealthy consumption of energy drinks.

Marcie Beth Schneider, on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which contends that energy drinks "have no place in the diet of children and adolescents," said that as a doctor, she has met parents who "inadvertently" gave energy drinks to their children to help them perform better in school sports, unaware of the potential health risks.

Another doctor, William Spencer, a member of the Suffolk County council in New York state, said he has personally seen a parent give an energy drink to her 10-year-old at a swim meet. "Many parents think energy drinks are akin to (non-caffeinated) sports drinks," he said.

Suffolk Council is the first municipality in the United States to impose what Spencer called "modest" restrictions on energy drink sales.

Jennifer Harris of Yale University, an expert on food marketing aimed at children, said ads for energy drinks frequently appear on cable channels such as MTV and Adult Swim that have more teenage views than adults watching.

She also noted how energy drinks were early adopters of social media marketing, with teenagers comprising 38 percent of unique visitors to

Monster's Facebook page, she said in written testimony.

Senator John Thune acknowledged that caffeine has been consumed for thousands of years, but he noted how it's been turning up in a variety of foods—not just energy drinks.

"When I hear that caffeine may now be added to products as diverse as potato chips and marshmallows, I have to wonder whether our fascination with caffeine has gone too far," he said.

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