

Utah becomes latest place to debate ending tax on tampons

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Utah Rep. Susan Duckworth, D-Magna, poses for a photograph at the Utah State Capitol Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2016, in Salt Lake City. Utah is one of the latest states to consider making tampons and other feminine hygiene products tax-free, diving into an international debate on whether women are penalized for their biology. Duckworth, said she wants feminine hygiene products tax-free because they are medically necessary items, but her bill would also cut taxes on adult incontinence products and children's diapers. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

The international debate over eliminating sales tax on tampons and other

feminine hygiene products that women must use has made its way to conservative Utah.

Governments that make money off the products penalize women for their biology, some say. That perspective has picked up momentum, with at least five U.S. states dumping the taxes.

But the Utah proposal, which is set for a committee hearing Wednesday, could face a steep challenge as some worry the move will put a dent in revenue.

Pennsylvania and Minnesota are among states that have eliminated the taxes. A handful of other states, including California, have seen similar proposals before their legislatures this year. In Wisconsin, a Democratic lawmaker has proposed providing free tampons in all public buildings.

President Barack Obama said in an interview with a YouTube blogger last month that he had no idea why feminine hygiene products were taxed.

Overseas, Canada removed taxes on the items last year, and British leaders, who have set the tax at the lowest possible level, have considered doing away with it altogether.

Feminine hygiene products should not be considered luxuries but necessities like prescription drugs or food, which most U.S. states do not tax, said Stephanie Pitcher with the Utah Women's Coalition.



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"Having a period is not a choice for women," she said.

The Utah proposal from Democratic Rep. Susan Duckworth has been dubbed "the tampon bill" by some critics.

Duckworth said she worries the nickname may hurt its chances during a hearing scheduled Wednesday before a House tax panel made up of only men.

"I'm going into an all-male committee, and I just don't believe they're

going to have much sympathy," she said.

The bill also calls for making adult incontinence products and children's diapers tax-free. She hopes that broadening her plan beyond feminine hygiene will get it more support, because all are medically necessary.

The measure could save residents who use those products at least \$30 each year in taxes, Duckworth said.

But while it appears to cut taxes, it could actually do the opposite, said Billy Hesterman with the Utah Taxpayers Association. Eliminating the tax might mean lawmakers raise the overall tax rate.

And the small savings for taxpayers would have a much bigger effect on the state budget, according to estimates from legislative budget staff. It would reduce revenue to the general fund by over \$1 million next year.

The fund is already shrinking because of Medicaid costs, Republican House Speaker Greg Hughes said. It also pays for key state programs such as transportation, corrections, and health and human services, he said.

Lawmakers may need more time to study the issue before the legislative session ends in mid-March, Hughes said.

With the Statehouse dominated by Republicans, Duckworth is realistic about the likelihood of her proposal passing.

"The chances of it getting out of committee are probably not very good, but I'm not going to give up on it," she said.

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