

At tobacco industry forum, panic over possible e-cigarette ban

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Electronic cigarette devices are prevalent around the world, but could be a thing of the past in the United States if President Donald Trump moves ahead with a national ban

While most of Washington is gripped by the impeachment storm

swirling around Donald Trump, a few blocks up Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, hundreds of executives are pondering another potential presidential upheaval.

Trump has floated the possibility of soon banning flavored e-cigarette products—and even banning vaping altogether. And stakeholders in the world of tobacco and nicotine are none too pleased.

The consensus at a global industry forum that ends Thursday in the nation's capital? Times are tough.

In the past three weeks, India and the US state of Massachusetts have banned the sale of [e-cigarettes](#). Two other states—New York and Michigan—have prohibited flavored e-cigarettes.

And from October, the Trump administration wants to ban all but tobacco-flavored products.

While Europe so far has escaped similar measures, the product that many industry experts believed would be their future is instead under attack.

At the Global Tobacco & Nicotine Forum, the nearly 400 in attendance are in agreement that the priority is to stop what they see as knee-jerk bans by worried governments.

"This is a pivotal moment for the industry," said Howard Willard, the chairman and CEO of tobacco giant Altria, a major stakeholder in the top US e-cigarette maker Juul.

"Vaping is at an inflection point."

On Wednesday, just before the industry forum opened for the day in

Washington, Juul announced a corporate shake-up, including the replacement of its CEO.

The industry is facing two problems: the increasing popularity of vaping among young people and the recent explosion of cases of pulmonary illnesses, some of them fatal, apparently linked to tainted vaping refill cartridges bought on the [black market](#).

So far, the toxic ingredient has not been identified.

The industry agrees that consumption should be limited to those over the age of 21, and has placed the blame on governments failing to punish stores for selling to underage buyers.

'It's crazy, basically'

But a total ban on electronic cigarettes in the name of harm reduction is out of the question and downright absurd, those at the Washington conference said, noting that cigarettes have far worse effects and are not banned.

At event booths, cigarette makers highlight less harmful alternatives—tobacco lozenges and pouches, but also tobacco heating systems.

Philip Morris International is betting on its IQOS: a sort of short cigarette inserted into a device that heats the tobacco and releases a vapor which the company says is less harmful.

At one forum session, Greek cardiologist Konstantinos Farsalinos took issue with India's ban, noting that one million smokers die in the country every year.

"They banned the least harmful nicotine products that they had on the market," he said with disdain.

David Sweanor, an adjunct professor of law at the University of Ottawa, chimed in: "That's public health negligence."

In Japan, liquid nicotine is banned, but cigarettes are legal.

"It's crazy, basically," Farsalinos said.

Fact or fiction?

US Senator Richard Burr, a Republican from tobacco-producing state North Carolina, slammed what he called a "frenzy" over the dangers of e-cigarettes and compared a possible ban to a "witch hunt."

He accused states like Massachusetts of instituting bans when "they really have absolutely zero facts to make a conclusion."

For industry executives and those who back them, the furor over e-cigarettes is first and foremost the fault of the media.

They say the stories about the summer spate of illnesses and youthful users were jumbled, and failed to take into account the idea that vaping might be the best alternative for traditional smokers who want to quit.

"We can't allow misinformation assumptions to drive policy and become accepted truths," said Willard, the Altria CEO.

At another panel discussion, participants took aim at the World Health Organization, which reiterated its opposition to e-cigarettes this summer.

Among the most powerful regulatory agencies, "by far the worst and the

most dangerous is the WHO," said consultant Clive Bates, adding that the Geneva-based body has "a general tendency to extreme positions."

To survive the crisis, industry executives concede that they have to resolve their credibility problem.

Part of that strategy is a communications issue: Juul targeted young users with Instagram posts until last year. On Wednesday, it announced it would forego advertising altogether.

But not everyone is on board.

Some want to be able to reach smokers seeking an alternative, and they also think it's possible to advertise to those over 21 while avoiding younger consumers, even on the Internet.

"We believe that next-generation products can be marketed responsibly to adult consumers," said Ricardo Oberlander, president and CEO of Reynolds American Inc, a subsidiary of British American Tobacco.

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