



A GLOBAL
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WATCHDOG

COVID-19
Monitoring
Brief



Global



STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief: The tobacco industry, its interests and allies

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This brief covers the previous 8 weeks' developments. Previous editions of the STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief are now available on the [COVID-19 Tobacco Tactics resource page](#) and via the [STOP COVID-19 Action Center](#)

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Developments in the monitoring period

Highlights

- The South Africa COVID-19 tobacco ban was ruled unconstitutional and unnecessary.¹
- PMI's CEO Calantzopoulos was part of an American-Hellenic Chamber of Commerce roundtable discussion on the COVID-19 vaccine alongside the Greek Prime Minister, Pfizer CEO and Deloitte CEO.²
- A paper published in the journal, Thorax, found that smokers are at an increased risk of developing symptomatic COVID-19. The report used data from 2.4 million users of a COVID symptom app.³

Tobacco Regulation

• **South African Tobacco Ban:**

— On 11 December 2020 the Western Cape High Court in South Africa ruled the tobacco sales ban during the COVID-19 lockdown was unconstitutional and unnecessary, after British American Tobacco South Africa (BATSA) took the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) to Court in May.^{4,5,6}

— The South African Government to appeal court ruling that tobacco ban was unconstitutional.⁷ The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) has said the government's appeal against the tobacco ban ruling may not lead to a further sales ban.⁸

— BATSA intend to oppose the government's application for leave to appeal the recent High Court judgement which found the tobacco ban during COVID lockdown to be unnecessary.⁹

— After the tobacco ban was lifted in South Africa in August 2020, research found the market share of BAT, JTI and PMI tobacco manufacturers had fallen.¹⁰

— According to officials of Tax Justice South Africa (TJSA), there were six brands that saw sales soar past the 'one-million-per-day' mark during the ban. TJSA stated that South Africa lost over R5bn in taxes.¹¹

Tobacco Regulation (Cont.)

- The outdoor smoking ban in Mallorca was relaxed in December 2020, but smokers will have to keep 2m social distancing rule. The smoking ban in hotels, restaurants and bars remains in place.¹²
- The Assam Government in India has extended their tobacco ban for another year in response to COVID-19.¹³
- Dartmouth College in the U.S announced a campus-wide ban on use of tobacco and vaping products in both indoor and outdoor spaces. The College President cited “growing evidence” of the link between tobacco use and a variety of life-threatening diseases, such as COVID-19, as one reason the policy was implemented.¹⁴

Academic Research

- A paper published in the journal, Thorax, found that smokers are at an increased risk of developing symptomatic COVID-19. The report used data from 2.4 million users of a COVID symptom app.¹⁵
- A study published in the American Journal of Respiratory Cell and Molecular Biology found that vaping can suppress immune function in e-cigarette smokers, potentially making them more likely to become infected with coronavirus. The article also says vaping could make the COVID vaccine less effective.^{16,17}
- Researchers have used a model of airway tissue created from human stem cells to pinpoint how smoking cigarettes causes more severe infection of COVID-19.¹⁸
- A preprint meta-analysis from the University of Arkansas found that smoking doubles the mortality risk in COVID-19.¹⁹
- [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](#) grantee [Riccardo Polosa](#) co-authored a preprint (preliminary/non-peer reviewed academic report) with an e-liquid manufacturer investigating second hand vaping COVID-19 risk. The study found that transmission of COVID-19 by vapour is 1% for ‘low intensity’ vaping and 5-17% for ‘high intensity’ vaping.²⁰ Reports on the finding focus on the 1%, low intensity figure.²¹
- Research by the University of Rochester, published in the journal Preventative Medicine, found that e-cigarette users might be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and may be more likely to spread the virus.²²

Corporate Social Responsibility

- PMI continue to use the pandemic as a greenwashing opportunity, taking part in the Asia Sustainability Conference to discuss improving air quality and cutting down carbon emissions. PMI’s Head of Environmental Sustainability spoke about the company’s commitment to climate action, inspired by the pandemic, saying that PMI aims to make all its factories carbon neutral by 2030.²³
 - PMI were one of the top ten plastic polluters in 2020.²⁴
- PMFTC (Philippine affiliate of PMI) is using the pandemic to pursue business transformation and provide smokers with non-combustible alternatives through the ‘Unsmoke Pilipinas’ campaign, launched in July 2019.²⁵
- At the 35th General Meeting of the International Tobacco Growers Association (ITGA) online event its president highlighted the importance of partnerships with tobacco companies for the sustainability of the tobacco sector and the protection of the supply chain (especially given the global pandemic). Representative from JTI and BAT took part in the event.²⁶
- According to a major Greek news company, the Greek Government approached the “big tobacco industry” asking for donations to cover the lack of 5 million needles and other consumables related to the COVID vaccine.²⁷
- A group of U.S. lawmakers sent letters to BAT and PMI alleging they attempted to “profit off the back of a global health crisis”. The letter states tobacco companies promoted their products during COVID-19 on social media platforms popular with young adults by offering free gifts like hand sanitizer, toilet paper and masks. Some ads pitched nicotine products as good for stress relief during Covid-19.²⁸

- BAT Bangladesh was awarded the Supply Chain Collaboration and Partnering award at the Bangladesh Supply Chain Excellence Awards 2020 for their pandemic crisis projects aimed at enhancing tobacco farmers livelihood, loss analysis of distributors and suppliers, and partnering with the government for capacity building.²⁹

Vaccine Development

- PMI's CEO Calantzopoulos was part of an American-Hellenic Chamber of Commerce roundtable discussion on the COVID-19 vaccine alongside the Greek Prime Minister, Pfizer CEO and Deloitte CEO.³⁰
- PMI and the Government of Canada are collaborating on vaccine development. The Canadian government has stated it is investing US\$130million in the Medicago vaccine (PMI owns one third of Medicago).^{31,32}
- BAT's COVID vaccine candidate has got U.S. approval for human trials. The COVID-19 vaccine is being developed by the company's biotech arm Kentucky BioProcessing.³³
- State Officials from the U.S. state of New Jersey say smokers should be a priority to receive the COVID vaccine.³⁴

Tobacco Business

- Tobacco companies including PMI, JTI, Imperial Brands and Altria Group all raised their sales or profit targets, saying the industry had done better than expected in 2020 mostly in US and EU.³⁵ BAT has boosted its revenue outlook for 2020 after COVID-19 had a smaller than expected hit on cigarette demand globally.³⁶
- Imperial tobacco reported an increase in revenue from cigarettes due to increased smoking rates during the pandemic.³⁷

Additional Resources

- **CDC advice** on [smoking and COVID-19](#)
- **Tobacco Tactics: Tobacco Smuggling**
- **Tobacco Tactics: Greenwashing**
- **Tobacco Tactics: Corporate Social Responsibility**
- **GGTC's list of COVID-19 related bans and contemplated bans** per country: [Bans/ Contemplated Bans on Tobacco/ Vaping Products](#)
- **The Union: COVID-19 - Bi-weekly brief on the science of smoking and COVID-19**
- **WHO: COVID-19 vaccine**

Get in touch

We welcome any contributions on issues mentioned in this update or anything related to COVID-19 and the Tobacco Industry. Contact us at bath@exposetobacco.org.

STOP's Rapid Engaged Action Team (REACT) supports governments and advocates facing challenges from the tobacco industry on crucial policy debates. [Request help](#)

Visit the [Tobacco Tactics COVID-19](#) page for further information.

Endnotes

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