The multimedia spots target sugary beverages in an anti-obesity effort

By Derrick DePledge

The public service announcements are deliberately gross: attractive young people chugging yellowy gobs of fat to make the point that drinking one can of soda a day can add 10 pounds to the body each year.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie and the state Department of Health launched a multimedia campaign Thursday to steer teenagers away from soda and other sugary drinks and toward healthier choices such as water. The $275,000 "Rethink Your Drink" campaign, funded by the state's share of tobacco settlement money, will run through May and include television, radio, print and movie theater ads.

The Abercrombie administration has called on state lawmakers to approve a new soda fee of 1 cent per ounce that would generate about $37 million a year for obesity and chronic disease prevention programs. The fee could reduce consumption by 8 percent to 10 percent, according to the state, while the ad campaign is meant to help counter marketing by the beverage industry that targets teenagers.

Twenty-seven percent of Hawaii high school students are overweight, compared with 57 percent of adults.

The Department of Health consulted with 10th-graders from Island Pacific Academy on the public service announcements. Students at Aikahi Elementary School, Alia-manu Middle School and Wai-anae High School produced the movie theater ads.

Abercrombie, who has a soft spot for ice cream, and Loretta Fuddy, director of the Department of Health, who said she struggles with her weight, said the ad campaign is about making teenagers aware of the consequences of their decisions.

"What we're dealing with here is a public health issue. This is a public health crisis that we're dealing with," Abercrombie said.

In the student-produced movie theater ads, the message is clear that not only soda, but junk food and a lack of exercise contribute to obesity. The local beverage industry and retailers have complained that the soda fee punitively singles out sugar-sweetened beverages.

"The reason it's called a beverage fee is you're paying for the privilege, if you will, of making that choice,"
Abercrombie said. "We're just asking you then to own up to your end of what everybody has to pay then, and you have to pay your share if you're going to do it. If you're not going to do it, then you don't pay the fee, obviously."

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