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Tobacco Company Chief Denies Nicotine Scheme in Testimony

He Insists Focus Was on Taste, Not Addiction

By PHILIP J. HILTS
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WASHINGTON, June 23 — In five hours of testimony before a Congressional subcommittee today, Thomas E. Sandefur Jr., the chairman and chief executive of the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, denied that his company had deliberately manipulated nicotine to keep its customers addicted.

Mr. Sandefur was virtually the only witness at the session before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, which is investigating whether tobacco should be regulated as a drug.



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Thomas E. Sandefur Jr., tobacco executive, testifying yesterday.

Mr. Sandefur reiterated his previously stated position that he did not believe that nicotine was addictive and maintained that his company controlled it only for taste. He attacked the testimony earlier this week by the Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Dr. David A. Kessler, as politically motivated.

In a related development, Attorney General Janet Reno announced today that the Justice Department was conducting a preliminary review of complaints by members of Congress that executives of tobacco companies had misled them about health problems associated with smoking.

Mr. Sandefur was shown scores of documents from the company's files and 'was pressed by Democratic members of the committee to acknowledge that the company's own research documents over 40 years suggested that nicotine was the central ingredient in tobacco, that it was addictive and that the company had made use of that in designing cigarettes to maintain its customers' addictions.

But Mr. Sandefur maintained throughout the day that nicotine was not addictive. "I am entitled to express that view, even though it may differ from the opinions of others," he said. He acknowledged that his company did control the levels of nicotine in cigarettes, but only to make cigarettes taste good.

Mr. Sandefur said several times today, when asked whether more reg-

ulation of cigarettes would be acceptable, that he wanted to be reasonable and consider the options. At the end of the session, he agreed to a future private meeting with members of the panel to discuss what kind of "reasonable regulation" of cigarettes might be possible. He said he would encourage the chief executives of other companies to attend the meeting.

Mr. Sandefur was asked to testify today because thousands of pages of internal company documents from his company were published by news organizations and had been received by the subcommittee as well. The documents show that the company did extensive research on the hazards of smoking and the additive qualities of nicotine from the mid-1950's until the early 1980's.

The release of the documents was just one of a number of blows the tobacco industry has taken this year, beginning in February when the Food and Drug Administration announced its willingness to consider regulating tobacco as a drug. Several new smoking bans were announced — from McDonald's restaurants to the American military. In addition, a variety of new lawsuits have been filed against the companies, including attempts by several states to recover money from tobacco companies to compensate them for having to pay the medical costs related to smoking.

Mr. Sandefur parried the toughest questions about the company's extensive research on the hazards and addictive properties of smoking by saying that he had not read the documents in question. He said he had only been in the company for the past dozen years, so he could not comment on company activities in the decades before the 1980's. He was named president and chief operating officer of the company in 1985. In 1989 he was named chairman and chief executive officer.

At one point, Representative Henry A. Waxman, the California Democrat who is chairman of the subcommittee, stacked up on the dais in front of Mr. Sandefur about two feet of biological studies on the hazards of smok-

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