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LAWMAKERS BASK IN TOBACCO INSTITUTE'S WARMTH

Rep. Howard Coble, R-N.C., punched a winning volley in his stadium court tennis match at the Hyatt Grand Champions resort.

Rep. Don Sundquist, R-Tenn., teed off with a drive straight down the fairway at the adjacent Indian Wells Golf Resort.

Rep. Alex McMillan, R-N.C., arrived for dinner in a tan-and-green checked sport coat, a vivid contrast to the stark blues and grays he typically wears for Congress. "Nice jacket," commented a member of his party. "I only wear this on junkets to California," he joked.

Those members of Congress and about 20 others were enjoying an all-expense-paid life last week at the fifth annual legislative conference of the Tobacco Institute. That's the association of cigarette makers and other tobacco interests, which after 25 years of surgeon generals' warnings on the dangers of smoking, insists that smoking cannot be directly linked to cancer, heart disease or stroke.

The tobacco industry has good reason to get together with lawmakers. It faces a range of attacks this year, from proposals to raise cigarette taxes to a ban on tobacco advertising. Not surprisingly, most members of Congress in attendance either hail from tobacco-producing states or sit on key tax, commerce and other committees that handle bills affecting the industry.

So while official Washington searched the forecasts for snow last week, the tobacco folk and lawmakers, many accompanied by their spouses, enjoyed the sun and palm trees at a two-year-old Southern California hotel that has 12 tennis courts, 4 swimming pools, 3 restaurants and 2 18-hole golf courses, and where the cheapest room costs \$200 a night.

The Tobacco Institute hired bands for dinner and dancing, as well.

In addition to Coble and McMillan, Carolinas lawmakers attending at least part of the four-day conference were: Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and Reps. Tim Valentine, D-N.C., Martin Lancaster, D-N.C., Steve Neal, D-N.C., Charlie Rose, D-N.C., Bill Hefner, D-N.C., and Robin Tallon, D-S.C. All but Neal, Hefner and Coble, a bachelor, brought their wives.

In addition to travel expenses, most of the lawmakers will receive a \$1,000 honorarium, a kind of appearance fee. They earned it basically by attending a 90-minute seminar to discuss political issues with some 125 cigarette manufacturers and other Tobacco Institute members.

Some heavy hitters, such as Helms and Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, D-Ill., chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, gave individual talks.

The honoraria are legal. Many lawmakers rely on the fees to increase their income beyond the \$89,500 annual salary for senators and representatives.

Still, lawmakers acknowledge that the payments offered by special interest groups can pose political problems. The new Congress may vote on whether to abolish honoraria as part of a plan to raise lawmakers' salaries to \$135,000.

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