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MillerCoors Agrees to Stop Selling Alcoholic Energy Drinks

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News Report

A settlement between MillerCoors and a group of state attorneys general will spell the end of the brewer's foray into marketing alcoholic energy drinks.

The Wall Street Journal reported Dec. 18 that MillerCoors announced it will stop producing and selling caffeinated alcoholic beverages, including those sold under its popular Sparks brand. At the same time, company officials maintained that the AGs allegations that the drinks were marketed to young drinkers were "inaccurate."

"Attorneys general from around the country are gravely concerned about premixed alcoholic energy drinks because these products are dangerous and look and taste like popular nonalcoholic energy drinks," said Maine Attorney General Steve Rowe. "They're popular with young people who wrongly believe that the caffeine will counteract the intoxicating effects of the alcohol."

Critics condemn youth-oriented Sparks marketing materials implying that alcoholic energy drinks allow users to stay awake longer and drink more. "We're thrilled that MillerCoors finally got the message that they were dealing with a public-health hazard," said Pete Schulberg, communications director for the Oregon Partnership, a community-based antidrug coalition. "High caffeine with high alcohol content and the fact that these products are marketing to young people makes for a dangerous combination."

Sparks has emerged as the leading brand in the alcoholic energy drink niche market; MillerCoors said it will continue to sell a reformulated version of Sparks that does not include caffeine, taurine, guarana and ginseng.

The company also agreed to end some marketing strategies that the AGs said appeared to be aimed at underage audiences, including content on the Sparks website, the use of "plus and minus" symbols signifying energy, and an affiliation with an "air guitar" performer. David Rosenbloom, director of Join Together, said the settlement's marketing reforms are just as important as the product's reformulation.

"Removing caffeine and other stimulants from Sparks is an important step for public health because it removes a significant risk associated with the product," said Rosenbloom. "We hope that this settlement will really lead to the end of the company's efforts to sell alcopops to underage audiences with youth-oriented marketing strategies."

Steve Gardner, director of litigation for the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) -- which sued MillerCoors earlier this year over Sparks -- said that today's settlement nearly finishes off the product category. "Now that Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors have each agreed separately to discontinue caffeinated alcoholic drinks, this entire niche of products is all but shut down," he said.

Gardner called on the remaining, smaller companies producing caffeinated alcohol beverages to quickly follow suit. "It was a bad idea that never should have gotten as far as it did -- adding caffeine to sweetened, high-alcohol-content malt beverages and marketing them to young people via word-of-mouth and infantile web sites," said Gardner.

Previously, Anheuser-Busch reached a settlement with CSPI and state attorneys general in which it agreed to stop producing and