



HEALTH

Alcohol, tobacco cut from free trade deal

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Health activists are lauding the Commerce Ministry's push to remove alcohol and tobacco products from a list of products covered by a free trade deal with the European Union.

Center for Alcohol Studies director Thaksaphon Thamarangsi yesterday said alcohol and tobacco should be considered "special products" and should not be included on the list of products to be discussed at trade negotiations with the EU.

Deputy Commerce Minister Alongkorn Pholbutr's decision to exclude alcoholic beverages and tobacco from the talks will help safeguard Thai consumers from an influx of hazardous products, which will become cheaper if they are listed under the free trade deal, he said.

The trade pact will also force governments to soften their alcohol consumption control policy, Dr Thaksaphon said.

About 80% of imported alcohol from the EU is well packaged and designed, and could attract young drinkers to try their products, he said.

"If these two products are included on the list, they will be exempt from customs tax," he said.

"The price of imported alcohol and tobacco will be cheaper and these products, which damage health and society,

will be more accessible to young drinkers and smokers."

Studies show that more teenagers are drinking alcohol on a regular basis than in the past.

Anti-alcohol and tobacco activists recently petitioned Mr Alongkorn not to bow to pressure from alcohol and tobacco producers.

Imported alcohol products attract 60% customs tax. The volume of alcohol imports from the EU last year — valued at 5.14 billion baht — accounted for half of total alcohol imports to the country, Anti-Alcohol Network coordinator Kamron Choodecha said.

"Free trade agreements are important for economic growth as well as the country's development and competitiveness, but the effect of alcohol on society should be taken into account," Mr Kamron said.

Tobacco Control Research and Knowledge Management Centre director Sirivan Pityaransrit said the removal of tobacco from the Thai-EU trade talks will benefit the public.

An estimated 10.9 million Thais smoke cigarettes. If the customs tax is reduced following the trade talks, the price of a packet of cigarettes will be at least five baht cheaper. This will lead to an increase of at least 4% in the number of smokers, she said.