

FED:12 sports ditch booze sponsorship

By Steve Lillebuen

MELBOURNE, June 23 AAP - Australia's biggest sporting leagues are under pressure to drop alcohol sponsorship after a dozen other codes effectively banned similar types of advertising and support.

Twelve leading sporting organisations - covering athletes in soccer, basketball, netball, swimming, cycling, hockey and others - have agreed to end all existing and future alcohol sponsorship agreements.

In exchange, the groups will share \$25 million in replacement government funding taken from new Alcopops tax revenues.

But the nation's biggest sports organisations - AFL, NRL and Cricket Australia - have not yet signed up to the new program, prompting alcohol abuse experts to push for a similar approach.

"We urge the remaining sports such as AFL, NRL and cricket to start discussions with the government as to how they too can move away from their present role in exposing children to alcohol promotion," said Professor Mike Daube, co-chair of the National Alliance for Action on Alcohol.

Sports Minister Kate Lundy, who announced the "Be The Influence" strategy on Saturday, said more sporting groups were not part of the initiative partly due to funding issues.

"With \$25 million available, this is the best we can do," she told reporters in Melbourne.

She did, however, praise the three big leagues for their own efforts in trying to reduce binge drinking.

"The issue here is that they are all carrying a responsible drinking message," she said.

Last week, the AFL announced a 10-year extension to a major sponsorship deal with Carlton United Brewers.

Cricket Australia has been sponsored by VB for years while the NRL has commercial partnerships with Fosters and Diageo, which makes Bundaberg Rum.

These kinds of funding arrangements, however, are now being questioned by some athletes.

"It would be an easy option to turn to the alcohol companies," said Olympic swimming champion Geoff Huegill, who supports Swimming Australia's decision to join the government initiative.

"Back in the 80s you had the tobacco companies that were doing the same things as well. From stamping that out, we've had massive change."

Football Federation of Australia CEO Ben Buckley says his organisation is proud to take a leadership role in reducing alcohol abuse.

"We have an absolute responsibility to make our community clubs and our professional clubs role models in society," he said.

But NRL spokesman John Brady said he hoped the government would invest more funding in harm prevention groups rather than target sports sponsorship programs.

"Trying to ban alcohol sponsorship isn't going to achieve anything," he said.

Australian Medical Association president Dr Steve Hambleton urged big sporting codes to realise the days of accepting cash from alcohol companies were quickly coming to an end.

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