The last puff

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With a strong, bipartisan vote in the House, Congress is on the verge of enacting one of the most important advances in public health policy in well more than a generation â€” sweeping federal regulation of tobacco products, the nation's No. 1 cause of preventable death.

The House voted 298-112 on April 2 in favor of granting regulatory authority over tobacco products to the Food and Drug Administration. The bill now goes to the Senate, which is widely expected to pass it. President Barack Obama, who has himself famously struggled with cigarette addiction, has said he would sign it, unlike President George W. Bush, who threatened last year to veto it if passed then.

With enactment now all but certain after years of struggle, the only question seems to be why did it take so long? Congress has not passed health policy legislation this sensible since, well, since who knows when? Even the biggest of Big Tobacco companies, Marlboro maker Philip Morris USA, supports it.

The bill will create a new center within the FDA, funded by fees from tobacco companies, to oversee the marketing of tobacco products, monitor and regulate ingredients and inspect manufacturing sites.

What it will really do is end the outrage that gave the federal government more authority to monitor and regulate a tube of lipstick than it had to monitor and regulate products responsible for the deaths of 438,000 Americans and $75 billion in tobacco-related medical costs every year.

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