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GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS CALL FOR END TO TOBACCO SPONSORSHIP OF RODEOS

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Oklahoma City, OK-- As thousands gather at Oklahoma City's Ford Center this week for the first ever US Smokeless Challenger Tour Championship, a group of 400 young activists will urge Professional Bull Riders, Inc. (PBR) to end its national sponsorship agreement with the U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company (USSTC).

USSTC is a national sponsor of Professional Bull Riders, Inc. (PBR), and is the title sponsor of PBR's US Smokeless Challenger Tour. On February 15-18, 2007, Oklahoma City will host the Challenger Tour championship event, which will offer one million dollars in prize money provided by USSTC. Challenger Tour events feature huge signs for spit tobacco products as well as booths that provide free tobacco samples.

Oklahoma Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) (www.okswat.com) youth activists will convene a public march at the Challenger Tour event to speak out against tobacco marketing at rodeos. "We are absolutely *not* calling for an end to rodeo or bull riding events. In fact, we are very pleased that the sport is growing so much in popularity," said SWAT member Jennifer Fugate. "But we're concerned that sampling booths, scoreboards, banners, and ads sponsored by the tobacco industry give kids the message that chewing tobacco is part of being a grown-up bull riding fan or cowboy."

"Why is a company that sells deadly and addictive products allowed to be showcased as the title sponsor of this PBR event? It's no secret that smokeless tobacco use is on the rise—especially with teenagers, and I wish PBR would Spit Out Big Tobacco! Kids look up to the PBR athletes as their heroes and role models. As it is now, the message they get is that in order to be a *real* cowboy, you have to have a round imprint in your pocket and a bump inside your lip," said SWAT member Kristy Ordonez.

"Cowboy Ted" Hallisey (www.cowboyted.com), a rodeo journalist and healthy lifestyles advocate for kids, came to Oklahoma City to support SWAT's effort. "Rodeo and bull riding have changed over the past 30 years, and now we know about the dangers associated with tobacco use," he says. "Let's showcase bull riding as a mainstream sport that is healthy and family-friendly."

PBR has several other high-profile national sponsors, including Ford, the U.S. Army, and Wrangler. "PBR clearly presents profitable sponsorship opportunities for many companies that are appropriate for a family-friendly sport like rodeo," said Andrea Craig Dodge, director of the Oakland-based Buck Tobacco Sponsorship Project and the Regional Tobacco-Free Rodeo Project (Buck Tobacco/RTFRP) (www.bucktobacco.org). "It can reject tobacco sponsorship in favor of a more family-friendly sponsor."

One out of ten teenage boys uses smokeless tobacco (also called spit tobacco), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Smokeless tobacco can lead to oral cancer, gum disease, nicotine addiction, and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Oklahoma SWAT is a movement dedicated to empowering youth to resist and expose big tobacco's lies while changing current attitudes about tobacco. There are over 120 active SWAT teams in Oklahoma comprised of nearly 3,000 middle and high school students.

Buck Tobacco/RTFRP, a project of the Public Health Institute, works to end tobacco sponsorship of rodeos. The project is currently funded by several sources, including a litigation settlement negotiated by the City and County of San Francisco and the Environmental Law Foundation; California Proposition 99; and the American Legacy Foundation.

The Public Health Institute is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting health, well-being and quality of life for people throughout California, across the nation and around the world. As one of the largest and most comprehensive public health organizations in the nation, the Public Health Institute is at the forefront of research and innovations to improve the efficacy of public health statewide, nationally and internationally. For more information about the Public Health Institute, visit www.phi.org.

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