

First year of 'fire-safe' cigarette law yields fewer deaths

By MICHAEL GORMLEY

Associated Press Writer

September 20, 2005, 12:03 PM EDT

ALBANY, N.Y. -- Annual deaths from fires blamed on cigarettes have fallen by a third in New York _ the first state that required tobacco companies to sell self-extinguishing cigarettes, a state official said Tuesday.

Last year 28 people died in New York state fires blamed on cigarettes. That's down from 43 deaths in 2000, 44 deaths in 2001, 38 deaths in 2002, and more than 30 deaths in 2003 for which the state has incomplete data, according to state records released Tuesday.

The data also shows fewer deaths blamed on cigarettes in the second half of the year and a decline month-to-month through 2004.

"This is it. This is the evidence that lives are being saved," Russell Sciandra, director of the Center for a Tobacco Free New York, told The Buffalo News which first reported the trend.

"We are encouraged by the results and hope the trend continues," said Laurence Sombke of the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control. He said the office won't draw conclusions until it can analyze another year or two of data.

The so-called fire safe cigarettes are identified by an asterisk, dash or diamond next to the bar code of a pack of cigarettes. The cigarettes will self-extinguish if they're not puffed on regularly.

The self-extinguishing cigarettes have bands around them that stop a cigarette from burning without puffing.

In June 2004, New York was the first state to phase in a law requiring tobacco companies to sell the new "fire-safe" cigarettes.

About 900 Americans die each year and another 2,500 are hurt by fires started by cigarettes left unattended.

Vermont will begin requiring the sale of self-extinguishing cigarettes in May 2006. In September, the California Assembly sent Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger a bill to require that all cigarettes sold in California be designed to go out when they're not being puffed. The bill is modeled after New York's law.

Canada begins the fire-safety cigarette sales Oct. 1, according to the Center for a Tobacco Free New York and the New York Public Interest Research Group.