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Greg Conley, the president of the American Vaping Association, said he doesn't like the way Alaska health officials have portrayed electronic cigarettes.

"It is clear that for an adult smoker these products are far, far less hazardous and they can help smokers quit," Conley said Thursday.

Conley, an e-cigarette advocate from New Jersey, flew into Anchorage this week to hold meetings with lawmakers' staff, as well as a press conference, where he extolled e-cigarettes as a way to help people quit smoking, comparing the products to nicotine gum or patches.

But state health officials disagree. Brian Penner, deputy manager of the state's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program, cautioned that e-cigarettes remain unregulated ^[2] and long-term health effects of the relatively new product remain unknown.

"There isn't enough research to say they're cessation devices," Penner said.

Both sides of the argument presented select information on the effects of e-cigarettes -- electronic devices that heat flavored liquids, often containing nicotine, to create an aerosol that users inhale.

Conley cited an October report ^[3] from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which said 22 percent of e-cigarette users had quit smoking within the past year, while less than 1 percent said they had never smoked before.

That same month, the state health department said that more of Alaska's high schoolers reported using e-cigarettes ^[4] than traditional cigarettes. The department also launched its own ad campaign titled "What's in the Cloud?" that lists what e-cigarette users inhale: nicotine -- addictive; lead -- brain damage; formaldehyde -- embalming fluid, it says. "E-cigs. Not harmless. Not healthy."

Conley said soon after he landed at the Anchorage airport this week he spotted one of the ads and likened it to the use of scare tactics. He said e-cigarettes give users less exposure to lead than an inhaler used for medical reasons.

"They still are putting out ads that try to deceive the public into thinking that if you're a smoker there's no point to switching to vapor products because they're just as hazardous," he said. As he talked he held an e-cigarette in his right hand. He said he gave up traditional cigarettes in 2010, turning to vapor products.

Penner said the department's ads simply informed the public of the effects of the cloud created when a person uses an e-cigarette. Jay Butler, chief medical officer of the state's Division of Public

Health, said the amount of the harmful chemicals in the cloud are less than in the smoke from a traditional cigarette. Still, he said e-cigarettes need to be regulated.

"I would agree that there's some promise and potential in e-cigarettes, but there's a lot we don't know," Butler said.

Bills await lawmakers when they return to Juneau this month that, if passed, would make the entire state smoke-free. Lawmakers filed the bills during the last session. The ban would include e-cigarettes.

Conley spoke out against the ban Thursday, saying that the decision to keep out e-cigarettes should be left up to the building owners. Mark Militello, owner of Anchorage's SUMO Vapor, said the ban would prohibit his customers from testing e-cigarette flavors in his shop.

"What am I going to tell them?" he said. "You can't do it in here, you've got to go outside?"

Sen. Mia Costello, an Anchorage Republican and co-sponsor on the Senate bill, said there's a false perception that e-cigarettes aren't dangerous.

"I don't have a problem treating them like a traditional cigarette," she said.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.adn.com/author/tegan-hanlon>

[2] <http://www.adn.com/article/20140511/new-e-cigarette-stores-anchorage-fly-under-state-regulatory-radar>

[3] <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db217.pdf>

[4] <http://www.adn.com/article/20151027/report-more-alaska-teens-using-e-cigs-cigarettes>