Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation Introduced

Kellogg Co. Chief Executive Officer David Mackay announced a $20 million anti-obesity campaign to encourage some of the world’s largest food makers to reconsider the way they sell their products.

PepsiCo Inc. of Purchase, N.Y.; General Mills Inc. of Golden Valley; Sara Lee Corp. of Downers Grove, Ill.; and other companies said they would make their products more health conscious.

Companies may reformulate products, place calorie labeling where it can be seen more easily and promote healthful eating, according to the Healthy Weight Foundation, which comprises 40 food and beverage makers, retailers and non-profit organizations including Girl Scouts USA.

“As an industry, we need to make it easier for people to make healthier choices,” Mackay, who will be chairman of Healthy Weight, said at an event announcing the partnership Monday at the National Press Club in Washington. “Collectively we can make a difference by taking action in the marketplace, in the workplace, and in schools.”

Food and beverage products have come under scrutiny by Washington policymakers as Congress considers health care overhaul legislation. Companies are rallying to counteract a comment last month from President Barack Obama that he would be open to a tax on soft drinks.

The nonprofit Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will independently set targets for the program and publicly evaluate companies’ progress.

Participants in the campaign include some of the biggest food and beverage manufacturers and distributors, including Battle Creek, Mich.-based Kellogg; Campbell Soup Co. in Camden, N.J.; Kraft Foods Inc. of Northfield, Ill.; ConAgra Foods Inc. of Omaha, Neb.; Coca-Cola Co. of Atlanta; and Unilever NV of Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Confectionary giants such as Nestle SA of Vevey, Switzerland; Hershey Co. of Hershey, Pa.; and Mars Inc. of McLean, Va., also are participating.

Retailers include Hy-Vee Inc., a supermarket chain based in Des Moines, Iowa, and Safeway Inc., which is based in Pleasanton, Calif.

Campaign members also will seek to improve employee health and fund a pilot program for nutrition education in public schools.

A penny-per-ounce tax on soda and other sugary drinks would raise about $150 billion over a decade while slimming Americans’ waistlines, the New England Journal of Medicine reported last month.

If beverages from Coca-Cola and Pepsi were taxed, the U.S. could raise $14.9 billion in the first year, the journal reported. The tax would encourage people to cut their daily calorie intake by at least 10 percent, the report concluded.

In an interview with Men’s Health magazine last month, Obama said he would consider a soda tax as part of an overhaul of the U.S. health care system.

“I actually think it’s an idea that we should be exploring,” Obama said. “There’s no doubt that our kids drink way too much soda.”

Mackay said any tax on an individual food would be “a mistake,” adding that any obesity solution will require a comprehensive approach emphasizing fitness and overall diet.

“Legislation to try to fix this problem simply is not going to work,” he said in a question-and-answer session at the event.