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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 18, 2015

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Mr. Harris Pastides
President
University of South Carolina
Osborne Administration Building, Suite 206
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

Dear Mr. Pastides,

Despite decades of research and countless studies confirming sugar-filled drinks as a leading contributor to our country's obesity epidemic, one of the world's largest corporations is using a campaign of pseudo-science, led by a professor associated with your university, to mislead consumers. As detailed in the *New York Times*, the Coca-Cola Company is apparently funding misleading and deceptive research and messaging to obscure the link between soda products and obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. As ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, I am greatly troubled by this attempt to interfere with consumers' right to accurate information about the products they purchase.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of adults in the United States are obese, and in 2008, the cost of obesity medical care among adults was estimated to be \$147 billion.^{[1][2]} Knowing that consumers are increasingly health conscious – and with billions of dollars on the line – Coca-Cola collaborated with scientists and an organization known as the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN) to minimize the perception of sugary drinks' contribution to the obesity epidemic.^[3] GEBN touts the supposedly superior effectiveness of exercise, rather than cutting calories, as a means to sustain a healthy weight.

Numerous health experts have decried this message as “misleading and part of an effort by Coke to deflect criticism about the role sugary drinks have played in the spread of obesity and Type 2 diabetes.”^[4] After the article's publication, 37 leading research scientists and public health figures wrote a letter to the *Times* calling the GEBN message “nonsense” and at odds with the totality of scientific evidence on the health risks of sugary drinks.^[5]

[1] <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>

[2] <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes.html>

[3] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/pepsi-cola-replaces-diet-coke-as-no-2-soda-1427388559>

[4] http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/coca-cola-funds-scientists-who-shift-blame-for-obesity-away-from-bad-diets/?_r=0

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/opinion/cokes-skewed-message-on-obesity-drink-coke-exercise-more.html?_r=1

The article is unspecific as to whether Coca-Cola provided its millions of dollars in funding directly to the professors for their private independent research, or to fund projects being supported by the University of South Carolina. I write to request you clarify the nature of the University's relationship with these projects, and that you review the academic integrity of any grant agreements in the past or present between professors and researchers at your institution and the Coca-Cola Company. I believe your university must determine whether this research is in effect promoting a predisposed and biased agenda, rather than reflecting the impartiality and objectively expected from a public academic institution.

Years of litigation with tobacco companies were necessary to fully expose the tragic public health consequences when companies lie about the hazards of the products they sell. I am deeply concerned that we may force future generations to relive this history if corporate-sponsored studies devoid of scientific integrity are permitted once again to deceptively downplay and conceal the dangers of a product consumed on a mass scale.

To prevent this outcome, and to protect the integrity of vital public-health research, I urge you to investigate the nature of the relationship between the Coca-Cola Company and any research at your institution and to make public any university grant agreements related to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Richard Blumenthal".

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate