

Deposits on wine cooler bottles?

Manufacturers say deposits would kill the fledgling industry

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Wine dealers and party-store owners are threatening to quit handling the increasingly popular "wine coolers" if Michigan becomes the first state to require a 10-cent deposit on their bottles.

"Our retailers will take it off the shelves," John Dagenals, representing the Package Liquor Dealers Association, headquartered in Southfield, told the state Liquor Control Commission Tuesday.

So what? say environmentalists, parks officials and farmers who are supporting a deposit rule. Wine cooler bottles are a dangerous litter problem, and society wouldn't be hurt if people consumed less alcohol, they said.

A 2½-HOUR debate in Lansing was largely a replay of the 1976 debate over the so-called "bottle bill."

That was when the Michigan United Conservation Clubs won 65 percent voter approval of a law requiring a five-cent deposit on beer and pop bottles and a 10-cent deposit on cans.

Then as now, the chief arguments were road-sides, parks and streams littered by throwaway containers vs. "forced deposits" and high costs.

Maxine Perry, acting chairman of the LCC, said the four-member panel would also consider written testimony but declined to say when it might act.

BUT THERE are a few new elements in the 1985 debate:

• Wine coolers — a blend of wine, citrus juice and carbonated water with less than 7 percent alcohol — have emerged as a popular drink, particularly among young people, in the last couple of years. MUCC estimated 10 million "throwaway" containers were sold last year in Michigan.

• MUCC and state Attorney General Frank Kelley are asking that wine cooler deposits be implemented by LCC rule rather than state law. Because the 1976 deposit law was passed by the voters, the Michigan Constitution requires any amendments be made by a three-fourths vote of the state Legislature. The wine industry insisted MUCC and Kelley go the legislative route.

• Fines for violations are stiffer under LCC rules than under state law, according to Patrick Laughlin, president of the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, Lansing. Moreover, LCC rules would affect only licensees, not consumers, Laughlin said.

• Wine dealers argued that the problems of labeling, handling and storage are far more difficult for them than for pop and beer distributors — bolstering the argument that many would simply quit handling wine coolers. "Do you really want to kill this industry?" asked Laughlin.

TO DEPOSIT supporters, however, the issue was litter — not legal fine points, not costs to the industry.

"Throwaways end up alongside rivers, lakes and parks," said Attorney General Kelley. "We don't want to go back to the bad old days when bottles and cans littered the state."

"Even retailers have trouble telling the difference between returnable (pop bottles) and non-returnable (wine cooler) bottles," he said, displaying samples of each.

Dr. Ronald Skoog, director of the state Department of Natural Resources, reported "dramatic increases" of litter in state parks due to wine coolers in the last year or two.

MUCC President John B. Eichinger of Holland quoted highway officials as reporting that "beverage container litter dropped from 220 bottles and cans per mile of highway in 1978 to 34 bottles and cans per mile in 1979. And 22 of the 34 containers in 1979 were brought in from other states."

TRENTON parks director Larry Fitch said that after a Fourth of July fireworks display, "youngsters filled garbage bags with deposit bottles and cans" but left the non-deposit wine cooler bottles behind.

Royal Oak parks superintendent Stephen Gillette, representing the Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, said his group found "90 percent of all identifiable beverage containers" littering parks today are wine coolers.

Carol Dansereau of the 100,000-member Michigan Environmental Council called the wine-cooler

situation a "loophole" in the bottle bill that "threatens to undo a lot of good the bottle bill did."

To industry charges that Michigan beverage sales fell after the deposit law took effect, Dansereau replied that raising the drinking age and Michigan's higher taxes were more important factors than deposits.

Don Nelson, Michigan Farm Bureau legal counsel, said "litter is a cost to a farmer" — picking it up from his fields, down time in harvesting crops, and damage to livestock which consume splintered glass when it gets in their hay. Cleaning up litter "should not be the landowner's responsibility and expense," he said.

And Ryan Buntke, representing the Marion Rod and Gun Club, said "the problem starts with these people — the businessmen who start these problems should solve these problems."

"THESE PEOPLE" — wholesalers and retailers of wine products — wanted to be paid for handling returnable bottles.

"No financial relief has been provided to the

beverage dealers for handling containers after seven years," said Edward Deeb, executive director of the 3,600-member Associated Food Dealers. "It's the financial responsibility of the state to provide financial relief. In other states, one to three cents is provided for beverage handling."

Don Taylor, vice president representing the Michigan Merchants Council, asked for a two-cent-per-container handling allowance for his members, mainly chain food stores and major merchandisers. For a fee, his group would "support any beverage container and any deposit" the state wished to impose.

John Van Dam, president of Modern Beverage Co., a Holland wine wholesaler, said handling returnables would require a \$75,000 to \$100,000 investment in equipment.

Martin Friedburg of Rave Associates Wine Importers of Ann Arbor placed the initial investment at "tens of thousands of dollars, and the net effect would be we'd have to get out of the cooler business."

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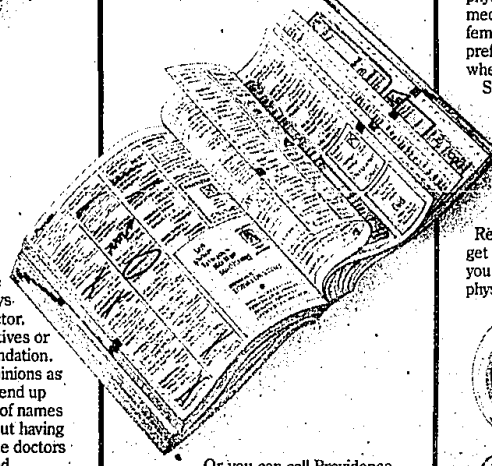
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