



Lakeland Ledger

Bush Supports Ending Ban on Wine Shipments

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Wednesday, February 2, 2005

TALLAHASSEE -- Wine wholesalers and law enforcement officials are furiously fighting efforts to allow the shipment of wine from out-of-state dealers directly to Florida consumers.

Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, filed a bill last week that would allow Floridians to again receive wine shipped from other states.

In 1997, lawmakers banned direct mailing of any alcoholic beverage. They cited concerns about underage drinking and the difficulties in collecting state taxes.

Graphically representing their concerns at a Tuesday news conference, the Florida Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking opened up three boxes that had been shipped to a 20-year-old Florida State University student, at the group's request.

The boxes contained four bottles of wine, a bottle of vodka and a bottle of tequila. The coalition said the student didn't have to sign for the shipments and no efforts were made by the shippers to see whether he was 21.

Attorney General Charlie Crist said the ease with which the shipments were made and received made it clear that the law should not be tinkered with. He said 55 percent of school-age students have consumed alcoholic beverages and that 40 percent have done so within the past month.

"Easier access to alcohol by our youth is in fact a recipe for disaster," Crist said. "We should not make it easier to add to the numbers."

Dockery said the coalition's publicity stunt pointed to a need for more regulation, which her bill would provide. Senate Bill 906 would require out-of-state wine shippers to register with the state so taxes could be collected, and would also require signatures from adults before wine could be delivered.

"Underage drinking is against the law and my bill does nothing to change that," Dockery said. "Right now, you have illegal shipments going on. I think when the bill passes, it's going to help law enforcement by licensing the vineyards."

She has an ally in high places. Gov. Jeb Bush said Tuesday he supports Dockery's bill.

"The idea that you can only buy wine through a certain distribution system -- I've always felt that was a little unjust," Bush said.

Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale, is drafting a similar bill to be considered in the House.

Tuesday's news conference was a show of force, with a dozen law enforcement officers from around the state joining Crist and business leaders.

Also joining the coalition: the state's largest liquor and wine distributors who stand to lose money if Floridians can skip the wholesalers and purchase directly from the vineyards.

Bill Herrle, vice president of the Florida Retail Federation, said the liquor wholesalers had a responsibility to prevent underage drinking and that maintaining the ban on out-of-state shipments was part of that responsibility.

Dockery, who has worked on passing the bill for six years after she couldn't ship wine to Florida during a vacation in Napa Valley, said the lobbying against her bill came as no surprise.

"(Allowing wine shipments) is the right thing to do. This is America. We're about freedom and choice. The fact that this law exists is ridiculous," she said.