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Crist: No mail-order alcohol

The state should continue to ban mail-order alcohol to combat underage drinking, he says.

By ALISA ULFERTS, Times Staff Writer
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TALLAHASSEE - Ordinarily, Charlie Crist has a taste for issues that appeal to consumers.

But Florida's Republican attorney general is siding with the state's retailers and law enforcement officers in an ongoing debate over a state law banning mail-order alcohol.

To Crist, concerns about underage drinking trump the convenience of buying by mail.

Minors can too easily order alcohol through the mail, Crist said Tuesday, standing beside a 20-year-old Florida State University student Tuesday who ordered wine and tequila over the Internet at the behest of law enforcement.

"Current Florida law places appropriate hurdles in front of those who underage drink," said Crist, surrounded by law enforcement officers and representatives from the Florida Retail Federation.

Crist called the news conference to underscore his support for the law. He has already filed a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court, which has been asked to decide whether such bans violate the interstate commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Twenty-four states, including Florida, prohibit mail order alcohol sales. Retail stores, which resent the competition, support the bans. Small wineries and breweries oppose them.

Crist, who is expected to run for governor in 2006, risks alienating fans of fine wines with his stance, but could gain some support among retailers and law enforcement. His position also differs with the current occupant of the governor's office.

Republican Gov. Jeb Bush thinks the ban is unconstitutional and ought to be repealed. "The idea you can only buy wine (from) a certain distribution system, I have always felt that was a little unjust," Bush said Tuesday.

State Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, has filed a bill exempting wine from the state ban. "It's all protectionism," Dockery said.

As a freshman in the state House of Representatives, Dockery voted for the the ban, which she saw as a way to prevent people from avoiding state sales taxes as well as preventing underage drinking.

But wine enthusiasts were soon complaining that the law cut them off from some of their favorite wines, which can only be bought directly from winemakers.

For Dockery, the issue crystalized during a visit to California's Napa Valley wine country. Dockery bought a case of wine but was told she couldn't ship it home.

"If you go in person and they see you and you still can't get it shipped to your home, that doesn't make any sense," Dockery said.

Dockery's bill would require out-of-state wine shippers to be licensed, pay a \$100 fee, collect information about who was buying and how much, pay the state sales tax monthly and obtain a photocopy of the purchaser's driver's license or other identification that shows a buyer's age.

Only wine would be covered, Dockery said, because she hasn't heard complaints from people about beer or spirits.

Times staff writer Joni James contributed to this report.