

# Oregon bill would hike wine, beer and cider taxes

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon legislators Tuesday, Feb. 23, introduced House Bill 3296, dubbed the Addiction Crisis Recovery Act, which would increase the state's beer tax by 2,800% and wine tax by 1,700%.

Based on industry estimates, HB 3296 would increase the cost of every bottle of wine sold in Oregon by more than \$2. The tax would be even higher on ciders and beers.

The bill's supporters say it will reduce underage and binge drinking by raising the wholesale price of alcohol, and the money raised from taxes will be invested in treatment and recovery programs and infrastructure for people with alcohol addiction.

Opponents, including beer, wine and cider business leaders, say the proposed tax could devastate their industries at a time when they're already struggling during the pandemic.

"It is unfathomable to think that now is an appropriate time to increase any tax on one of Oregon's homegrown industries that has suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic, let alone one of this magnitude," Scott Kelley, owner and wine-



A barrel and vines at White Rose Estate, Dayton. The wine, beer and cider industries are bracing for a potential tax hike in Oregon.

maker at Paul O'Brien Winery in Roseburg, said in a statement.

Jennifer Sitton, spokesperson for the Oregon Wine Council, a statewide industry advocacy association, told the Capital Press the council is "strongly opposing this extreme proposal."

According to the council, wine tasting room sales have already declined during the pandemic by an estimated 80%, a \$3 billion loss, while smaller wineries relying on tasting room and restaurant sales lost more than 60% of their revenue due to COVID-19 closures.

Sam Tannahill, founder and winegrower at A to Z Wineworks and Rex Hill winery in Newberg, said in an emailed mes-

sage Wednesday that the idea of increasing the tax on small, local wineries during an economic crisis is "incomprehensible."

"As written, this proposal would potentially force most of Oregon's prized wineries to simply shut down, as they would be unable to sustain their operations with this drastic of a tax increase," wrote Tannahill.

The bill's advocates, including Oregon Recovers, the nonprofit coalition backing the bill, say the proposal is an important step toward addiction recovery.

The text of the bill says the funding will be used to establish an Addiction Recovery District for each geographic region and tribe in the state and will fund treatment beds, detoxification centers and intensive outpatient openings.

But the bill's critics point out that most consumers don't want a tax

hike. According to a survey last month taken by Patinkin Research Strategies, a research firm, 3 out of 4 Oregonians say Oregon's existing alcohol taxes are either too high already or about right.

The Oregon Beverage Alliance, comprised of brewers, winemakers, cidemakers, distillers and suppliers, said in a statement the potential tax hike could be harmful to their industries.

"Oregon already has some of the highest alcohol prices in the country," the Oregon Beverage Alliance reported. Tax increases, the organization said, will "only make it harder for these businesses to invest in rehiring, equipment, upgrades and expansion, and will result in higher prices for consumers."

## — STATE NEWS IN BRIEF —

### More contagious Brazilian virus variant emerges in Oregon

SALEM — A coronavirus variant that was first detected in Brazil has emerged in Oregon, the first known case of the new variant on the contiguous U.S. West Coast, medical authorities said Tuesday.

The sample was sent to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the end of January by medical officials in Douglas County, Oregon. They said they received the results back on Monday night, which showed the P.1 variant.

"The P.1 variant ... appears to be related to business travel outside the United States to and from Brazil," the Douglas County COVID-19 Response Team said in a statement Tuesday.

The variant, which was first found in Manaus, Brazil, appears to be more contagious than other COVID-19 strains. It can potentially be contracted by someone who was already infected or who has been vaccinated.

There have been 10 additional cases of the P.1 variant reported in the U.S., with five in Florida, two in Minnesota and one each in Oklahoma, Alaska and Maryland, the CDC says.

Health officials in Douglas County, located in western Oregon, said they are awaiting results of other samples that were sent to the CDC for genome sequence DNA testing for emerging COVID-19 variants.

The Oregon Health Authority said the unidentified person who contracted the Brazilian variant has been working closely with the local health department and has been self-isolating.

Health officials on Tuesday also reported 13 new coronavirus-related deaths in the state, raising the known death toll to 2,225. There were 269 new confirmed and presumptive cases in the state, for a total of 156,037, authorities said.

### University of Oregon to return to mostly in-person classes

EUGENE — The University of Oregon will go back to predominately in-person instruction for the fall term, officials said.

President Michael Schill says the decision was made following an announcement Friday from Gov. Kate

Brown that higher education will be included in the state's next phase of vaccinations, the Register-Guard reported.

Employees of the state's public and private colleges and universities will be eligible for the COVID-19 vaccination starting May 1.

In January, the university announced it was "ramping up planning" to provide access to COVID-19 vaccines for faculty, staff and students quickly when supplies become available.

The University of Oregon also has provided logistical support to current local vaccine efforts.

According to the Oregon Health Authority's phased approach to distribution, the majority of University of Oregon students are included in Phase 2. The University will offer vaccinations to students in jointly sponsored clinics during that phase of the process.

### Driver gets 20 years for I-5 shootings

MEDFORD — A former UPS driver charged in shootings that injured a woman and damaged vehicles along Interstate 5 in Southern Oregon has been sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Kenneth Ayers, of Roseburg, was sentenced Tuesday in Jackson County Circuit Court for three counts of attempted murder, five counts of unlawful use of a weapon, three counts of reckless endangerment, and four counts of criminal mischief, The Mail Tribune reported.

Ayers, 49, pleaded guilty to the charges last week. From May to August 2020, multiple drivers reported to Oregon State Police that their vehicles had sustained damage from bullets, including flattened tires, loss of power steering and a pierced coolant hose in a semi. There was no apparent pattern to the shootings.

They happened in Jackson, Josephine and Douglas counties during the day and night and happened to vehicles traveling north and south.

On Aug. 19, a woman was shot in the shoulder while driving on I-5 between Gold Hill and Central Point and police arrested Ayers about 60 miles (96 kilometers) away. He was employed by UPS as a driver at the time.

Ayers declined to speak at sentencing.

— Associated Press

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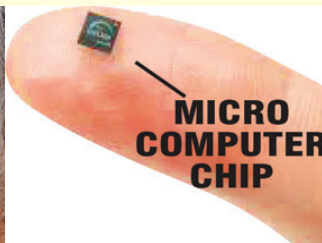
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