Missouri Moves One Step Closer to Liberalizing Liquor Laws

Joseph Miller

On March 3, the Missouri Senate passed SB919, a bill that would remove long-outdated restrictions on the sale of beer and other types of alcohol in the state. As currently written, the bill would:

1. Remove alcohol level restrictions on malt liquor.
2. Remove restrictions on the type of alcohol that can be sold at microbreweries and repeal some local taxing authority on such breweries.
3. Allow beer companies to lease coolers to retail stores.
4. Allow all beer sellers to sell growlers.
5. Make it harder for the state to reject applications for liquor licenses.
6. Allow for special permits for out-of-state manufacturers at festivals.

As we've written before, Missouri (along with all other states) have byzantine liquor laws dating back to prohibition. While public attitudes toward the responsible consumption of wine, beer, and other spirits has steadily become more permissive, Missouri and other states have only slowly updated their rules over the years (Alabama got rid of its last dry county on Super Tuesday). And most of changes SB919 presents, like allowing the sale of growlers, are common sense. As we pointed out in testimony over this issue,

"Beer in containers larger than growlers is available for sale at retailers. Growlers are legal, and are sold at breweries and brew pubs. SB 919 would only allow a product that is legal to be sold in a
quantity that is legal in a place that already sells the same product in much larger quantities."

The only opposition [6] to the bill is related to allowing beer companies to lease coolers to retail stores. Smaller producers fear that this will put them at a competitive disadvantage against large brewers. However, competition in the beer and spirits industry is intense, and there is little reason to fear monopolization of the market from cooler-leasing any more than we fear it in the consumer goods industry at large, where buying shelf space at local stores is a common practice.

Missouri’s alcohol laws are convoluted and antiquated. Alcohol regulations should have both a legitimate public purpose and, once enacted, a track record of success in achieving that purpose. If they do not, bills like SB919 may be a step forward for consumers in the state. Should provisions in the bill, such as cooler leasing, become problematic, Missouri can always revisit policy to correct clear and present market issues.

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