

Health Officers Urge Rejection of Alcohol Access Bill

The Maryland Association of County Health Officers (MACHO) is strongly objecting to Senate Bill 745 and House Bill 879, legislation that would protect so-called “alcopops” with low tax rates and easy access by teenagers. Alcopops include such sweetened malt beverages as Smirnoff Ice, Bacardi Silver, and Jack Daniel’s Hard Cola.

Earlier this month, the Attorney General issued an opinion that these products should be classified as liquor, with restricted access and higher taxes. But the industry-backed legislation would fix the taxes at the beer rate, and permit the products to continue to be sold at all locations where beer is available.

“This legislation represents terrible public health policy,” said Larry Leitch, health officer of Carroll County and President of MACHO. “Cementing easy access to alcopops in the law undermines efforts to reduce underage drinking and substance abuse.”

According to the American Medical Association:

- The marketing of these products targets teenagers, with more teen girls exposed to advertisements than women 21 or over.
- More than one third of teenage girls have tried these products.
- Use of alcopops by teenage girls is associated with high-risk sexual behavior, being in a car with a driver who is drinking, and passing out from drinking.

A July 2007 report by the Marin Institute in California found:

- Underage drinkers consume 47% of alcopops in California.
- Taxing the products as liquor would reduce underage consumption by 35% and reduce associated crime, high-risk sex, and traffic crashes.

“With California moving to regulate alcopops as liquor, it makes no sense for Maryland to go in the exact opposite direction,” said Peter Beilenson, chair of the legislative committee for MACHO and health officer of Howard County. “This bill needs to be stopped immediately.”

###