

# Empire Editorial: Alaska needs rational liquor laws, not bumbling bureaucracy

**Posted:** April 6, 2014 - 12:04am

In Haines, Sean Copeland and Heather Shade have a promising new business. This summer, they'll open their doors to the cruise tourists who pour like rain into Haines and Skagway.

There's only one small problem — under Alaska law, they're legally prohibited from selling their product to anyone who walks through their doors.

That isn't right.

Copeland and Shade are the owners of Port Chilkoot Distillery, one of five liquor distilleries in Alaska. Unlike the state's breweries and wineries, distilleries cannot offer tastings, and they can't sell their product over the counter. They can only sell to a middleman who distributes it to liquor stores, bars and restaurants.

On Wednesday, the labor and commerce committee of the Alaska House approved HB309, which would fix that problem.

The bill creates a "craft distillery" liquor license that permits distillery tours, allows over-the-counter sales and lets visitors try up to 3 ounces of liquor.

While time is running out on this session, there's still time for the legislature to act and help these small businesses. Distilleries shouldn't be held to a different standard than the state's wineries and breweries.

Alcohol abuse is a valid concern in Alaska, but our distilleries aren't mass-producing \$8 bottles of R&R whiskey. They're making \$45 bottles of salmon-flavored vodka in small batches. The abuse of a product by a misguided few is no reason to restrict access for the law-abiding whole.

While the state seems intent on rationalizing its liquor laws, the federal government is going in the opposite direction. Last month, the Food and Drug Administration announced it will prohibit Alaska's brewers from giving their spent grain to farmers unless those brewers invest in costly drying equipment.

Since the dawn of brewing in Alaska, the state's small brewers have given their used grain — left over after the brewing process — to local farmers, who feed animals with it. These arrangements, usually built on a handshake, have benefited both sides.

The grain stays out of local landfills and farmers have to buy less feed.

Naturally, such a process is too simple for the FDA, which says it's unsafe for animals. They want the grain dried and tested before the giveaway.

Nevermind the fact that no animal has ever been sickened by spent grain, nevermind the fact that most brewers can't afford drying equipment.

The FDA's actions in this scenario are misguided. If implemented, the new rules will mean more waste, not less, as brewers simply throw their spent grain away.

The state of Alaska seems to be moving toward rational rules for alcohol production. Let's see if the federal government can follow Alaska's example.

- Empire editorials are written by the Juneau Empire's editorial board. Members include Publisher Rustan Burton, [rustan.burton@juneauempire.com](mailto:rustan.burton@juneauempire.com); Director of Audience Abby Lowell, [abby.lowell@juneauempire.com](mailto:abby.lowell@juneauempire.com); Managing Editor Charles L. Westmoreland, [charles.westmoreland@juneauempire.com](mailto:charles.westmoreland@juneauempire.com); and Asst. Editor James Brooks, [james.k.brooks@juneauempire.com](mailto:james.k.brooks@juneauempire.com).