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The U.S. proposes raising tariffs on E.U. distilled spirits to 15%

The Distilled Spirits Council said the increase would squeeze bars and restaurants during the holiday season, with Irish whiskey exempt

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The U.S. administration has proposed raising the tariff on distilled spirits imported from the European Union to 15% from 10%, a move that drew immediate criticism from the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, which said the increase would add pressure to bars, restaurants and spirits businesses during the year-end holiday period.

In a statement released Wednesday, Nov. 25, DISCUS President and Chief Executive Chris Swonger said the proposal was published in a Federal Register notice tied to the Section 301 structural excess capacity investigation. The group said it was disappointed that the administration did not exempt all imported distilled spirits from the proposed tariffs, especially products from the EU.

DISCUS said the proposal includes one notable exception. According to the group, it reflects the president's Sept. 13 announcement to remove the tariff on whiskey from Ireland, and the council urged the administration to put that change in place quickly.

The proposed tariff increase would matter across the beverage business, not only for importers of European spirits but also for wholesalers, retailers and on-premise operators that rely on those brands. A higher duty can raise costs, squeeze margins and weaken the competitive position of EU spirits in the U.S. market. It could also expose American spirits exporters to retaliatory measures if trade tensions deepen.

Swonger said the timing is especially difficult for the hospitality industry. He said restaurants and bars are relying on the holiday season to make up for what he described as an already challenging year, and argued that additional tariffs on imported spirits would further strain businesses that are dealing with rising costs and closures.

The council also tied the proposal to broader weakness in the U.S. spirits market. DISCUS said slowing demand and continuing trade tensions are contributing to distillery closures in the United States. It cited a nearly 7% decline in active distilleries as of August from a year earlier, which it said was the first time closures had outpaced openings.

The statement framed the issue as both a trade and domestic business concern. DISCUS urged the administration to exempt imported distilled spirits from all tariffs, saying that would help protect jobs linked to hospitality and reduce the risk of a new round of retaliation against U.S. spirits exports.

Section 301 tariffs are imposed under U.S. trade law and are often used in response to trade practices the government considers unfair. In this case, DISCUS referred to a structural excess capacity investigation, though the group's statement focused mainly

on the proposed tariff effect on distilled spirits rather than on the broader scope of the inquiry.

The proposed increase from 10% to 15% would apply to EU distilled spirits under the plan described by DISCUS. While Irish whiskey appears set for relief under the Sept. 13 announcement, the industry group said many other imported spirits would still face higher duties if the proposal moves forward.