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Colorado Lawmakers Propose New Alcohol Fees to Fund Addiction Services

Bill targets manufacturers and distributors with tiered charges as state faces high alcohol consumption and budget shortfalls for treatment programs

Monday, February 9, 2026



Democratic lawmakers in Colorado are preparing to introduce a bill that would impose new fees on beer, wine, and spirits to fund addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery programs. The proposal, expected to be introduced in the Colorado House this week, targets manufacturers and wholesale distributors of alcoholic beverages. The fees would be $0.26 per bottle of spirits, $0.05 per bottle of wine, and about $0.03 per six-pack of beer. Small breweries would be exempt from these charges.

The fees would not take effect until July 2027. The Colorado Department of Revenue would collect the money, which an oversight board would then distribute to programs focused on alcohol-related substance use disorders. According to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the state had some of the highest per-capita alcohol consumption rates in the country as of 2024, along with the 7th highest rate of alcohol-induced deaths.

State Representative Jamie Jackson, a Democrat from Aurora and one of the bill's sponsors, said the measure is intended to create a dedicated funding source for services that are facing budget cuts. "We're talking about a billion-dollar industry annually, billions of dollars, and I think it's really time for us to put people over profits," Jackson said. She emphasized that as lawmakers look for ways to balance an $850 million state budget deficit, funding for addiction services is at risk.

State Senator Judy Amabile, a Democrat from Boulder, is also sponsoring the bill. Under Colorado law, these fees are not considered taxes because they are collected from a specific industry to fund services directly related to that industry. This distinction allows lawmakers to implement the fees through legislation without requiring voter approval under the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR). However, revenue from such enterprise fees is capped at $20 million annually per enterprise in Colorado.

To maximize funding, the bill would create three separate fee-funded enterprises: one each for beer, wine, and spirits. Sponsors hope this structure could generate up to $60 million per year in total. The funds would support early intervention programs, community outreach efforts to deter impaired driving, inpatient and residential treatment services, detoxification programs, crisis stabilization services, and recovery programs that include behavioral health treatment.

The bill also includes provisions to prioritize veterans' access to treatment and recovery services. About 2% of the revenue would be set aside for Colorado's federally recognized Native American tribes and urban Indian organizations.

Advocates for addiction services say the funding is urgently needed as both state and federal resources decline. Tonya Wheeler, executive director of Advocates for Recovery Colorado, said that without stable funding for prevention, treatment, and recovery programs, people will not get the help they need. Wheeler also pointed out that federal support has diminished due to budget cuts at agencies like the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

The proposal faces opposition from some quarters. Last year, a similar measure failed after pushback from Governor Jared Polis and industry groups. Polis expressed concern that the fees would raise prices for consumers and advocated for exempting all beer companies from the charges—including large brewers like Coors Brewing Company and Anheuser-Busch. Bill sponsors opposed this exemption for large companies, arguing it would undermine the policy's intent.

Governor Polis has not yet taken an official position on this year's proposal but indicated he will review it if it reaches his desk. Negotiations between lawmakers and the governor's office are ongoing.

Industry groups remain skeptical about the plan. Shawnee Adelson, executive director of the Colorado Brewers Guild, said her organization is concerned that new fees could harm craft breweries already struggling with rising costs and declining demand. Other trade groups representing winemakers and distillers have voiced similar concerns but have not taken official positions on the bill.

The debate over how best to fund addiction services in Colorado continues as lawmakers prepare for difficult budget decisions in the coming months.