News from Washington

House bill to allow USPS to ship alcohol reintroduced

Reps. Dan Newhouse (R-WA), Jennifer Wexton (D-VA), and seven other co-sponsors reintroduced the USPS Shipping Equity Act (H.R. 3721) on May 25. The bill, which is identical to legislation introduced last Congress, would allow the Postal Service to ship beer, wine and other alcoholic beverages directly from licensed producers and retailers to legal customers.

Current law prohibits the Postal Service from shipping alcoholic goods; making private shippers, such as FedEx and UPS, the only shipping option for wineries, breweries and other producers to have goods delivered directly to customers. This bill would allow USPS to ship these beverages and would generate an estimated $190 million annually in new revenue for the Postal Service.

If passed into law, USPS would have two years to develop regulations ensuring that the Postal Service is prepared to safely deliver alcoholic beverages to adult consumers with appropriate identification checks. The bill also would expand access to direct-to-consumer alcoholic shipments.

Unlike private shippers, USPS delivers to every address in the nation. The current ban on the Postal Service's right to ship alcohol limits access to these products for many Americans, especially in rural areas.

"NALC applauds Reps. Newhouse and Wexton for reintroducing the USPS Shipping Equity Act," NALC Executive Vice President Paul Barner said. "The bill is an important step toward meeting the growing needs of our customers while generating revenue for the Postal Service, expanding the agency's service opportunities, and supporting small businesses nationwide."

FAMILY Act introduced in Congress

Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced an updated version of the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (H.R. 3481/S. 1714) on May 17. The FAMILY Act would provide 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for all workers, including postal employees.

The updated bill expands the types of caregiving relationships that would be covered. Workers could use this leave for personal illness as well as caring for a spouse, registered domestic partner, parent, child, parent-in-law, child-in-law, grandparent, step-relatives and more. Additionally, the bill would allow workers to use the leave for non-medical safety needs relating to sexual or domestic violence.

The FAMILY Act would use a progressive wage replacement rate for benefits that would supply 85 percent on the first $1,257 of monthly wages, 69 percent of monthly wages from $1,258 to $3,500, and 50 percent of monthly wages from $3,501 to $6,200.

Currently, federal employees, including postal employees, are entitled to 12 weeks of medical and family leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, but it is not guaranteed paid leave.

A version of the FAMILY Act has been introduced in every Congress since 2013. NALC will update letter carriers on any future action by lawmakers.

Debt limit deal signed into law

Following a contentious period of negotiations among President Biden, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), a deal to avert a default on the nation's debt was agreed upon and signed into law on June 3, just in time for the nation to avoid default on June 5.

The Fiscal Responsibility Act (Public Law 118-5) suspends the debt limit through Jan. 1, 2025, and imposes federal spending caps for the next two years. In Fiscal Year 2024, spending for non-defense agencies will essentially remain flat, except for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Increases in funding will be capped at 1 percent for defense and non-defense agencies in Fiscal Year 2025. The deal also includes a stipulation to help avoid government shutdowns in 2024 and 2025. If by Jan. 1, 2024, Congress has not approved all 12 appropriations bills, a continuing resolution will be enacted that cuts spending for both defense and non-defense agencies by 1 percent until all 12 appropriations bills are approved. This provision will be in effect next year and in 2025. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the law would reduce the deficit by $1.5 trillion over a decade.

The law rescinds $28 billion of unspent COVID-19 relief funds. It also rescinds $1.4 billion of the $80 billion in funding for the IRS that was included in the Inflation Reduction Act. Additionally, it redirects $20 billion of this funding to other non-defense spending. It expands work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by 2025 from those ages 18 to 49 to ages 18 to 54. And, it cancels extensions for federal student loan payments suspensions 60 days after June 30. It also includes permitting changes that would streamline environmental review processes on projects such as new roads.

The House vote on May 31 came after weeks of bipartisan negotiations between congressional leaders and the administration and a procedural vote from the House Rules Committee. The bill advanced out of the committee with a 7-6 vote, with all four Democrats and two Republicans voting against the bill.

Although it was a bipartisan bill, lawmakers from both sides of the aisle raised concerns: 71 House Republicans voted against the bill, 26 of whom are members of the conservative Freedom Caucus. Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH), Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Mike Johnson (R-LA) were among eight of the Freedom Caucus members who ultimately supported the bill. The Republican "no" voters cited concerns that the bill did not do enough to cut government spending. Even with 71 opposition votes, a large majority of Republican members (149) voted to pass the bill.

On the Democratic side, 46 House members voted against the bill, 40 of whom are Congressional Progressive Caucus members. Many of the House Democrats who voted "no" cited concerns about new work requirements for SNAP, the rescinding of IRS funding, permitting provisions, and the non-defense spending caps for federal programs.

Ultimately, the bill passed the House with a bipartisan vote, with more Democratic members (165) voting in favor of the bill than Republicans (149), even though the latter are in the majority.

Following House passage, the next day on June 1, the Senate passed the measure in a 63-36 vote. During Senate consideration, 11 amendments were introduced, all of which failed, before the final vote. Forty-four Democratic senators voted in favor of the bill, while four Democratic senators, John Fetterman (D-PA), Ed Markey (D-MA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), voted against it. A majority of Republican senators, 31, voted against the bill, while 17 GOP senators, including Minority Leader McConnell and Minority Whip John Thune (R-SD), voted for its passage. **PR**

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