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Groups Call on Liquor Control Commission to Protect Michigan's Children

Michigan public health and safety groups today called upon the Michigan Liquor Control Commission (MLCC) to enforce Michigan law that requires higher taxes and stricter controls on alcopops, the sweet, sugary alcoholic beverages that look and taste like lemonade, cola, punch, and tea.

Alcopops are popular with junior and senior high school students: in a 2007 survey, 12.2 percent of 8th graders, 21.8 percent of 10th graders, and 9.1 percent of 12th graders report consuming alcopops within the last 30 days. Girls are much more likely to consume alcopops than boys. The younger the drinker, the more likely he/she will consume alcopops. Among 8th grade drinkers, 78 percent report alcopop consumption in the last 30 days compared to 59 percent of 19-20 year olds and 36 percent of 25-30 year olds. Some popular brands are Mike's Hard Lemonade, Smirnoff Ice, Skyy Blue, Captain Morgan Gold, and Bacardi Silver.

Alcopop producers market these products as beer, which means low taxes and wide availability. But alcopops are not beer and share no characteristics associated with beer. Under Michigan law they are "mixed spirit drinks" because they contain distilled spirits mixed with fruit juices and other nonalcoholic beverages. Mixed spirits drinks are taxed at much higher tax rates than beer (\$1.81/gallon vs. \$.20/gallon) and are available in only 3,970 liquor retail outlets compared to 7,359 outlets for beer. Because the MLCC has failed to apply the proper classification, alcopop producers are able to pocket about \$5 million each year in taxpayer dollars while gaining increased access to the youth market.

The MLCC's failure to enforce Michigan's laws is bad news for Michigan's youth and families. Underage drinking constitutes one of the most serious health and safety risks for young people. More than 10 million American youth under the age of 21 drink alcohol, over 7 million of them are binge drinkers, and 2.4 million are heavy drinkers. Adolescent drinkers perform worse in school, are more likely to fall behind and have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence. Those who start drinking before age 15 were 12 times more likely to be unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol, 7 times more likely to be in a motor vehicle crash after drinking and 10 times more likely to have been in a physical fight after drinking. Among drinkers, those who had their first drink before the age of 13 were twice as likely to have unplanned sex, and more than twice as likely to have unprotected sex.

Michigan Prevention Association, MADD, Michigan Alcohol Policies that Promote Health and Safety, and many local community coalitions have organized a Statewide campaign calling upon the Michigan Liquor Control Commissioners to enforce the law and protect Michigan's children by properly classifying alcopops. Fifteen representatives attended MLCC's semi-annual public hearing on December 2nd to convey their concern to the Commission. This was the third visit by campaign participants in the last year to MLCC.

"No one should be above the law, including alcopop producers," said campaign spokesperson Marie Hansen. "By treating alcopops properly as mixed spirits drinks, the MLCC can protect our children and stop the raid on Michigan's tax revenues by the purveyors of these youth-oriented alcohol products. We call upon the Commission to do the right thing for the youth of Michigan."