

Brewers oppose changing beer tax

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Taxing beer based on its alcohol content would punish consumers and do little to curb problem drinking, two B.C. craft brewers said Tuesday.

The reaction comes to a study and recommendation from the **Centre for Addictions Research** in B.C. that taxes on booze be linked to alcohol levels.

The centre claims pricing encourages consumption of higher alcohol drinks. Beers with less than four per cent alcohol occupy less than one per cent of the B.C. beer market, it said.

Finance Minister Carole Taylor told Canwest News Service the idea would be considered for the February budget but would be complex to implement.

But Bruce Dean, owner of Kamloops Brewery, said the "vast majority" of beer sold in B.C. is in the four to five per cent range, making taxation based on alcohol levels pointless.

"It would make for a very complex tax regime."

Both Dean and Vern Lambourne, brewmaster for Vancouver's Granville Island Brewing, say the taste test administered by researchers is meaningless.

Researchers with the **Centre for Addictions Research** gave young University of Victoria students two types of unmarked beer, the first Spinnakers Doc Hadfield Ale (3.8 per cent) and the second, Kokanee Gold (5.3 per cent). They reported students had no taste preference and reported no difference in enjoyment.

Lambourne said the two beers are unique in their tastes, with percentage of alcohol having little to do with it. The Kokanee product is dry beer with a thin body while the Spinnakers is a fuller tasting English-style ale.

"The only people it (variable tax) would hurt would be the consumer. Generally, stronger beers are more flavourful."

One of those, Granville Island's Merry Monks Ale is rated at 8.5 per cent. The winter beer is a popular and critically acclaimed product in B.C.'s thriving craft beer industry.

Dean said measuring alcohol content in beer is imprecise and variations can occur. If government is looking to curb excessive drinking by young people, he suggested looking at coolers designed to taste like soda pop.

Those products are up to 60 per cent higher in alcohol content than a typical beer.

"Do young people -- teens under drinking age -- like sweet things or bitter things? I think it's sweet things. Alcohol pops are probably more appealing to young people. Bitter things appeal to a more experienced palate."

The No. 1 selling beer in B.C. -- Budweiser -- is regular strength beer brewed with rice to reduce bitterness. Dean said that makes it more palatable to many people, including youth.

"There's almost no bitterness. How do you legislate for that?"

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