

Monday, June 7, 2010

GUEST COMMENTARY

Michigan's beer regulations helped in speedy recall, provides a model for others

The following guest commentary was written by Steve Arbaugh, president, Bayside Beverage Company

For more than 70 years, Michigan has enjoyed a safe, efficient and working system for regulating how beer goes from a brewer to a distributor to the consumer. As a system of regulation, it emphasizes consumer safety through effective tracking and accountability. It also provides a model for how food and other beverages such as wine should be distributed to consumers statewide.

This recent Memorial Day, we got a real-world look at how Michigan's beer regulations can help keep potentially harmful products from consumers. On Friday, May 28th at around 5 p.m., Labatt learned that several cases of six-pack bottles of Labatt Blue Light sent to Michigan might have been contaminated with some glass and instituted a voluntary recall. Labatt immediately informed our company, Bayside Beverage Corporation, the designated Labatt distributor serving Northern Lower Michigan, about recalling the affected beer.

Within hours, Bayside identified 86 affected cases that had been shipped into retail, when they were shipped to Michigan, when they left our distributorship and what stores received them. Seventeen Bayside employees were notified of the immediate need to respond and gave up their precious time with family and friends on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. We contacted the affected stores in Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Emmet and Otsego counties. In many cases, Bayside management, salespeople, delivery drivers and merchandisers drove to stores to personally inspect their inventories and removed any suspect packages. We worked round the clock with our retail partners, who rolled up their sleeves and gave us their full cooperation on one of the busiest weekends of the year and they deserve a huge amount of gratitude for their efforts.

By Memorial Day, May 31, we had recalled all but a few of the cases. We worked non-stop to get to those remaining cases of beer. In the meantime, Labatt aggressively communicated with the news media about the voluntary recall, telling consumers to be on the lookout for the affected beer, coded E10 and to call 800-268-BEER with questions or concerns.

One key reason Michigan's beer distribution system could respond quickly to the possible contamination was because each distributor distributes specific brands to a single specific territory. This streamlines the distribution process and promotes accountability and efficiency. Michigan beer distributors like Bayside are responsible for keeping track of all the beer that comes to our warehouse from the brewer, and what stores it goes to after it leaves on our delivery vehicles. Our workers are trained to make sure we maintain this ironclad chain of custody. We are proud of this responsibility because it helps protect consumers.

Beer distribution's one-distributor-per-brand-per-territory model helped track a contaminated product within 72 hours. In 2009, a deadly salmonella outbreak linked to peanut butter began in a contaminated peanut factory in 2006. A nationwide outbreak of e.coli-contaminated lettuce that sickened dozens of people, including in Michigan, stumped investigators for months before a source was identified.

Regulations like those used for beer distribution could have protected people during outbreaks, and possibly even saved lives.

Michigan's beer distribution regulations work. Tight regulations and territorial integrity helped us respond quickly, efficiently and responsibly in a recall. By emphasizing accountability and safety, Michigan's beer distribution system provides a model that other food and beverage producers could emulate.