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The state Senate begins debating a bill Wednesday that would force supermarkets to route alcohol sales through live cashiers. The all-self-checkout Fresh & Easy stores would especially be affected.

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Self-checkout lanes are a convenient way to purchase groceries -- and an easy way for minors to buy booze. Anti-alcohol groups want to put a stop to that, setting off a skirmish between the supermarket industry and community groups over how alcohol can be sold at the grocery store.

The California Senate is set to begin debating a bill today that would force supermarkets to route all alcohol sales through live cashiers, who could ensure that buyers are sober and of legal drinking age.

The legislation breezed through the Assembly this year over the objections of some large grocery chains. It has support from organizations fighting alcoholism and teen drinking, including Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Marin Institute as well as labor-allied community groups such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

California already forbids cigarettes, spray paint and some over-the-counter medications to be sold in self-service checkouts to make it tougher for minors to obtain them. The bill, AB 1060, would add beer, wine and spirits to that list, according to its author, Assemblyman Hector De La Torre (D-South Gate).

"It is a big discrepancy," De La Torre said of the alcohol loophole. Why "not have the same restrictions?"

Still, the bill goes against the grain of previous alcohol regulation in California, which has among the most consumer-friendly laws in the nation. If approved, the legislation would also have an outside effect on Fresh & Easy Neighborhood Market stores. That chain, which uses self-service checkout exclusively, would have to adjust its model or give up lucrative alcohol sales.

Self-service checkout systems are growing in popularity. Shoppers run the items across a scanner and place them in a bag on an electronic scale. The machine checks to see whether the weight of the product matches what was scanned to keep customers honest. Consumers like the convenience, and supermarkets save on labor.

When a shopper buys alcohol, the devices are programmed to freeze the transaction until a clerk confirms the age of the buyer. But these safeguards failed or were ignored by supermarket staff almost 20% of the time, according to a April test of Southern California food stores by UCLA's Community Economic Development Clinic and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

Cheating is so easy, according to De La Torre, that websites and blogs are devoted to helping teens game the system. The tips include explaining how to scan nonalcoholic beverages such as six-packs of soda and swap them for beer (note to hooch hustlers: This is theft) and how to time a credit card swipe to override the system.

Other blogs advise which days and times are likely to be the busiest for clerks supervising self-check counters, allowing more opportunity for subterfuge.

But industry groups say they have worked out technology glitches and increased staff training so that minors are no more likely to successfully buy alcohol through self-check than they are through full-service lines.

"We have safeguards in place to make sure the alcohol purchase is flagged by an attendant or clerk," said Dusty Lutz, director of the self-serve-checkout division of NCR Corp. of Atlanta.

Current laws requiring retailers to check the identification of anyone they suspect is a minor and to refuse sales to intoxicated individuals are sufficient to control the problem, said Ron Fong, chief executive of the California Grocers Assn.

The California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control is concerned about underage drinking but doesn't believe self-check counters contribute to the problem, said Chris Albrecht, the agency's legislative liaison. The department is not supporting the bill and believes there are adequate controls in place, he said.

Though the legislation would not present much of a problem for traditional supermarket chains, which sell most goods through full-service checkout lanes, it would present a large obstacle for Fresh & Easy because it operates only self-

check lanes, said Willard Bishop, a retail strategy and marketing consultant in Barrington, Ill.

The proposed law would upset the company's business model. "It's like kicking out one of the legs of a stool for them," Bishop said.

Tesco, the giant retailer that owns Fresh & Easy, has had problems with self-service checkout systems in its native Britain. This year it paid about \$10,000 in fines to British regulators for alcohol sales to minors. Two years ago, a member of Parliament called Tesco CEO Sir Terence Leahy "the godfather of binge drinking."

Fresh & Easy is working with the grocers association to lobby against the bill. Safeway Inc., which owns Vons, also is against the legislation.

Alcoholic beverage producers are staying out of the fight.

"This is an issue for the retailers," said Mike Falasco, a lobbyist for the Wine Institute, which represents California's wine industry.

The debate comes at a time when consumers are increasingly embracing self-service technology, said Lee Holman, an analyst at IHL Group, a Franklin, Tenn., retail technology consulting firm.

Holman estimates that transactions at self-service checkout lanes and kiosks will surpass \$775 billion this year and will more than double to \$1.6 trillion by 2013.

He said it was unlikely that many teens were procuring booze through self-service checkout lanes.

"Why would you go to the trouble of taking the alcohol to an area where there are lots of cameras and at least one attendant and try to pull off some switch?" Holman said.

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