

# Mississippians are drinking at a record pace during the pandemic

**By Bobby Harrison  
Mississippi Today**  
The COVID-19 pandemic has driven Mississippians to drink.

“When COVID hit, apparently everybody started buying toilet paper, liquor, fitness equipment and they started renovating their homes,” said Chris Graham, commissioner of the Department of Revenue. “Just overnight, our numbers (liquor sales) went through the roof. In March our numbers went way up and continued through December.”

Such is the dichotomy that is Mississippi: the heart of the conservative Bible Belt, where liquor was not made legal until 1966 and where until this day four counties remain dry for liquor and beer sales. Heck, in some counties before the law was changed in 2020, it was illegal to even possess liquor.

Former Gov. William Winter, who passed away recently, used to tell stories of collecting a liquor tax for the state in the 1950s during his tenure as tax collector even though the entire state was dry.

For much of the time since the pandemic hit in full force in March, socially conservative Mississippi has led the nation in terms of growth of liquor sales, Graham recently told a legislative committee.

The Alcohol Beverage Control, which is a division of the state Department of Revenue, regulates liquor sales in the state and also is the supplier of liquor and wine to the state’s 1,600 restaurants and catering services and more than 600 liquor stores. Graham said in a normal year, ABC delivers about 3.5 mil-



Mississippians are buying a record amount of liquor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

lion cases of liquor and wine, but delivered about 4 million during 2020.

For the first six months of the current fiscal year, which started on July 1, the state has collected \$53.1 million in taxes on liquor and wine – an increase of 30% over the previous year. And for the previous fiscal year, liquor and wine taxes were up 9% thanks primarily to the strong sales that occurred late in the fiscal year that ended June 30 as the coronavirus ramped up in the state.

In fairness to Mississippians, though, they are not just sitting around drinking. Graham pointed out, based on his personal observations, that the sales of toilet tissue, exercise equipment and home building supplies also were up.

Indeed, state revenue reports compiled by legislative staffers reveal that people are shopping more. Sales tax collections to the state — generated from the 7% tax levied on most retail items — are up 4.6% to a little more than \$1 billion. People especially are shopping online. Use tax collections from the 7% tax on

items purchased online are up 40.3% to \$204.5 million. Use tax collections continue to be one of the fastest — if not the fastest — growing revenue streams for the state.

Overall, revenue collections are up \$236.1 million or 8.4%.

When the pandemic hit and many businesses were impacted by a slowdown, the fear was that revenue collections would take a dramatic nosedive, forcing a reduction in vital state services in such areas as education, health care and law enforcement. But that revenue nosedive did not occur.

Former State Economist Darrin Webb, who retired last year, earlier said that collections were buoyed in part by the extra \$600 per week in unemployment benefits and stimulus payments provided by federal legislation. In a poor state like Mississippi, with a large segment of its populace working in low paying jobs, the federal funds were a major boost.

In addition, Mississippi — to the dismay of many — has the highest state-imposed sales tax on food. With peo-

ple staying home more, they most likely were purchasing more food helping to increase sales tax revenues.

And apparently if Mississippians were eating at home, they wanted some liquor or wine to go with their meals.

The result is that instead of legislators having to cut budgets as was feared this past summer, they now are making plans to provide a \$1,000 per year pay raise to teachers, costing about \$51 million annually.

The rosy state revenue report belies the fact that many Mississippians are hurting economically, especially since the federal stimulus funds have been cut or are beginning to be exhausted. Some believe the situation will get much worse not only for Mississippians but for state revenue collections if additional federal stimulus is not provided in the coming weeks. And, of course, if revenue collections decline that could lead to a cut in those vital services.

But based on what has happened thus far, legislators are hopeful they are not facing the specter of those budget cuts and are even planning a major investment in education in terms of teacher pay.

After all, many sources of state revenue collections — liquor and others — are on the rise. And many believe with the Legislature in session, at least the sale of liquor will continue to rise.

## USDA, Mississippi sign agreement to improve forest conditions on public and private lands

### Press Release

A Shared Stewardship agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the State of Mississippi was signed on Wednesday, January 13, during a virtual ceremony.

USDA Under Secretary of Agriculture James Hubbard and Mississippi State Forester Russell Bozeman signed the memorandum of understanding for the state.

This agreement establishes a framework for federal and state agencies to collaborate better, focus on accomplishing mutual goals, further common interests and effectively respond to the increasing ecological challenges and natural resource concerns in Mississippi.

“Through shared stewardship, the Forest Service and Mississippi have unprecedented opportunities to do the right work in the right places at the right scale,”

### For the Health of Our Forests, Welcome the Idaho Forest Group

Marc Brinkmeyer is the owner and CEO of Idaho Forest Group (IFG), one of the nation’s largest lumber producers. I have known Marc for 6 years, through our shared conservation work. He and I are Regular Members of the Boone and Crockett Club, North America’s oldest conservation organization, formed in 1887 by Theodore Roosevelt. Marc is also a Board Member of the National Wild Turkey Federation. When he is not donating his time and resources working on conservation projects or improving the communities where he works, he is hunting and fishing.

This past week, IFG announced plans for a new sawmill in Lumberton, Mississippi, a town with a history of producing lumber. They are bringing new technology and will employ 135 employees to fully utilize the forests in the surrounding area.

Forest management and conservation can reverse the poor forest conditions we are witnessing in many parts of Mississippi and help wildlife thrive. Managing forests, which includes harvesting, makes them resilient and able to withstand fire, pests, and diseases. Many wildlife managers consider active forest management the best solution to meet the habitat requirements of the largest

variety of species. Forest management reduces canopy closure and creates young forest habitat, which provides food, nesting, and hiding places for wildlife. It protects stream health and fish, drinking water, and coastal marsh habitats.

Without the value that companies like IFG can provide to landowners, logging contractors, and truck drivers, we are likely to see less forest management, which will exacerbate the problems of wildfire, lead to further degradation of forest health, endanger more species, and result in poor air and water quality. We are also likely to see increased land conversion to non-forested uses and the loss of the basic capacity to ensure we have healthy, resilient forests important for a wide variety of ecological benefits, not to mention the economic benefits to rural America, especially in an economically depressed state like Mississippi.

What started as a side trip to South Mississippi as part of a turkey hunting trip Marc made a few years ago is now resulting in a great project—one that will create good-paying jobs for many Mississippians, provide a significant economic impact to the state, and will benefit the conservation and management of our forests. And to top it off, it is owned by a remarkable individual who has a concern for conservation and the communities where he works. I don’t have all the answers, but the more people like Marc Brinkmeyer we have in Mississippi, the better.

Wildlife Mississippi supports IFG’s effort to build a mill in Lumberton and looks forward to partnering with them to further conserve our region’s forests. I also would like to thank the Lamar County Board of Supervisors, the City of Lumberton, the Hattiesburg Area Development Partnership, the Mississippi Development Authority, and the Pearl River Community College for their confidence in Marc and IFG. All of our combined efforts will go a long way to continuing to make Mississippi a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

24th nationally to sign such an agreement to strengthen partnerships within the state to increase the scope and scale of critical forest treatments that support communities and improve forest conditions.

The agreement will also be signed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Director Aurelia Skipwith at a later date. The memorandum of understanding can be found at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/shared-stewardship>



by James Cummins

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