

Only 66 of 239 eligible private liquor shops to open for now

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NEW DELHI: Less than a third of the 239 privately run liquor stores will be allowed to open from Saturday, according to excise department order on Friday that approved 66 of these shops to open under the condition that they adhere to the odd-even rule in place for market places.

Delhi on Monday allowed liquor stores to open, unless they were in a mall, the airport or containment zones. There are 239 privately run shops that are eligible to open but needed to first submit stock records and declare they are not in a containment zone.

Friday's order, issued by special commissioner (excise) Sandeep Mishra, cleared 66 of them and also warned store owners against selling liquor without scanning the barcodes on the products. "In case of any un-scanned sale, the MSR (monthly stock record) gap generated shall be treated as the stock sold and 70% Special Corona Fee shall be levied," read the order.

Excise officials said that these 66 shops will be allowed to operate from Saturday on alternate days between 9am and 6.30pm. With this, more than 240 liquor stores will be allowed to reopen since the first relaxation order was issued by the excise department on May 4.

There are 864 liquor shops in Delhi. Of these, 172 were standalone, government-run shops

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allowed to open first, with more being opened in phases.

When asked about the remaining stores, a senior official said, "We have issued directions to the municipal corporations to also open their stores, but only on odd-even basis. More stores will be granted approvals soon."

The excise department, however, has so far not compiled the number of liquor stores under the municipal corporations that will be allowed to reopen.

The delay in the order issued by the government left many private liquor store operators disappointed as they complained of not being able to reopen their shops despite complying with all the state orders. "I submitted the required undertaking that our outlet does not fall under a Covid-19 containment zone. I also updated the stock list the day before yesterday. The approval should have come on Thursday," RS Mittal, who co-owns a liquor store on Vikas Marg said.

In its May 18 order, the excise department did mention that all L-7 licensees (private liquor shops) are directed to conduct monthly stock record (MSR) updates between May 19 and May 21 (Friday). "Only after submission of the MSR compliance report and the undertaking, the shops will be allowed to open on the odd-even basis (sic)," the order stated.

Vinod Giri, the director-general of the Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies, said that even as more liquor stores are reopening in the city, they are not pulling as much crowd as they should. "The massive crowds and rampant violation of social distancing norms that we saw earlier are no longer there. Our initial reports suggest that after the 70% corona cess was imposed, sales have reduced. Even though liquor rates in Haryana and other states have increased by 10-15%, they are still cheaper than Delhi," Giri said.

He added that the industry met excise minister and deputy CM Manish Sisodia to demand a rollback of the cess. Senior government officials said that the matter was discussed on Thursday by chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and the rest of the cabinet ministers. "But it was decided that we would wait because the government does not have the complete liquor sale data as of now to fully assess the impact of the corona cess," said a senior government official on condition of anonymity.