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Group fighting Utah's tough 0.05 alcohol limit gathers 10,000 signatures

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A national lobbying group says it has gathered 10,000 signatures in its fight to repeal Utah's strict, new drunken-driving law.

Utah is the first state in the country to lower the state's blood-alcohol content limit for DUI from 0.08 percent to 0.05 percent.

In May, the American Beverage Institute (ABI), a lobbying organization that fights for responsible on-premise consumption of adult beverages, launched a petition drive opposing the measure.

"In under a month, we've reached over 10,000 signatures and that number will only continue to climb as more constituent voices are heard," Sarah Longwell, ABI's managing director, said in a news release issued Monday. "It's obvious that the general public in Utah — especially those in the restaurant and tourism industries — are opposed to the decision of state lawmakers to lower the blood-alcohol arrest level to 0.05."

ABI claims the industry was "caught off guard" by the bill and it "didn't have the opportunity to fully voice their concerns."

However, Rep. Norm Thurston, R-Provo, said he announced plans for his bill in December 2016 and it went

through House and Senate committee hearings as well as floor debate in both houses.

"We were working (on the bill) before the session started and it didn't pass until the third-to-the-last day," he said during a recent interview with The Tribune. "It wasn't fast-tracked."

The law doesn't take effect until Dec. 30, 2018, giving critics time to point out needed changes. Their first chance will be June 21, when the Legislature's Transportation Interim Committee is expected to hear ways to address any unintended consequences of the law.

After the Utah Legislature approved HB155 — and Gov. Gary Herbert signed it into law — the ABI began battling the state, placing full-page ads in Idaho and Nevada newspapers under the headline: "Utah: Come for Vacation, Leave on Probation."

The Utah Hospitality Association, a lobbying group for bars, has followed its lead and recently started an on-line fundraising campaign to help pay for lobbying efforts with hopes of repealing, or at least lessening, the penalties for those for those arrested with the lower blood alcohol content.

Despite the backlash, Thurston still stands by the law."