

Iowa's Bottle Law should be strengthened

Worst thing Iowa could do: Scrap easy return of bottles and cans

Iowa passed our bottle and can redemption law in 1978. Since then we pay 5 cents each time we buy a can of beer or bottle of Coke and get the nickel back when we return the container to the place we bought it.

States surrounding Iowa take no such action to reduce roadside litter and boost recycling efforts. Out here on the edge of the prairie one can feel our policy is out of step — which means Iowa actually is ahead of the game. In 2010, 38 countries in the world and 10 U.S. states and Guam had bottle and can redemption laws.¹ The same number of programs remain in the United States but now 58 countries have bottle bills.²

Once again, however, the beer and soft drink distributors and others who would rather not keep their responsibility on this issue are attacking the Iowa law. House File 814 would let beverage dealers pass off their responsibility to accept returned cans and bottles to agents or redemption centers as many as 10 or 15 miles away, depending on the size of the county. Convenience of returns — a hallmark of the current law — will be lost for many consumers under this bill. Better options to improve the current law are available.

Container recycling landscape

In January 2017 about 300 million people lived in countries with bottle bills. New laws passed in Europe and Australia since then will soon double that number and one expert claims that by 2030, a billion people in the world will pay a charge on a drink container and get the money back when they return it.³ The main reason for this movement toward responsibility in dealing with container waste is the terrible problem of ocean pollution. New islands of plastic are appearing in the world's oceans and micro plastic material is everywhere. While reducing litter along roadsides or in oceans may have been the primary goal of bottle bills, they also contribute to increased recycling rates, thereby helping to reduce greenhouse emissions through energy savings.

Just raise the fee, make handling the cans and bottles an economic benefit, and be a world leader in recycling.

The U.S. Container Recycling Institute reports that return rates for aluminum, PET plastic and glass in states with a bottle bill is much higher than states without. A 2013 study found:

“On average, states that incentivize with container deposit laws recycled aluminum, plastic and glass containers at double the rate of states without bottle bills in 2010. In states with bottle bills, aluminum cans were returned at a rate of 84 percent, compared to 39 percent in states with other systems in place.”⁴

For PET plastic, used in 2-liter soft drink bottles, the return rates are lower since bottled water is rarely included in redemption state requirements, but the difference in the percentage of returns is more dramatic.⁵ Newer data (2015) shows PET plastic returned at a rate of 63 percent in bottle bill states compared to only 18 percent in the other 40 states.⁶ Specific to Iowa, “472 beverage containers are recycled per capita in Iowa now: nearly twice as many as the average in non-deposit states (226).”⁷

A 21st century solution

COVID-19 disrupted many supply chains, having a clean, separated waste stream through redemption programs is important in allowing companies to maintain their commitments to percentage of recycled content.⁸ And this source of a clean waste stream for containers can be improved. The 2019 rate of beverage container return was nearly 90 percent in Michigan, which raised its nickel deposit to 10 cents.⁹ Iowa would certainly gain by such a move, and still be saving consumers money in real terms. Remember, a nickel in 1978 is worth 20 cents today.¹⁰

Some grocery stores have mostly solved the dirty returnables problem by having a container redemption station outside the store. However, maintaining such equipment or making staff available to process returned beverages is costly. There is little in it for a grocery store since they only get a penny per deposit item to cover their costs.

So that leads to an environmental answer. Boost the nickel to a dime or more and double the handling fee to 2 cents. In addition, include water bottles and other non-carbonated containers in the program. Then we will all have enough to gain by being good stewards and the outlets that sell the drink containers will have more of their costs covered. The link between buying the container and returning the container to where you bought it can be strengthened. We just need to put more money into the system.

Iowans already accept the responsibility since they have been returning containers to groceries and other stores for more than 40 years. Just raise the fee, make handling the cans and bottles an economic benefit and we can continue to be a world leader in recycling responsibility.

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¹ National Council of State Legislatures. State Beverage Container Deposit Laws. 3/13/2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/state-beverage-container-laws.aspx>

² Susan Collins. Container deposit laws expanding worldwide. Resource Recycling. May 19, 2020. <https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2020/05/19/international-embrace/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Clayton Coleman. Bottle Bills and Curbside Collection: An Overview of Recycling Policy Approaches. Environmental and Energy Study Institute. September 21, 2018. <https://resource-recycling.com/recycling/2019/10/06/international-embrace/>

⁵ Susan Collins. Container deposit laws expanding worldwide. Resource Recycling. May 19, 2020. <https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2020/05/19/international-embrace/>

⁶ Container Recycling Institute. Winners and Losers Under Iowa House File 575: An Analysis. March 2018. file:///C:/Users/dosterberg/Pictures/Graph%20of%20IMar%2019%20Winners%20and%20Losers%20IA%20H575.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leslie Nemo. Road ahead for recycled PET markets complicated by coronavirus-induced supply disruptions. Waste Dive. May 20, 2020.

⁹ Bottle Bill Resource Guide: Michigan. <https://www.supermarketnews.com/sustainability/michigan-grocery-retailers-resume-can-and-bottle-returns>

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: CPI Inflation Calculator. [Accessed July 2020] https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm