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Eight states celebrate BIG returns on small deposits

As bottle bills turn 20, 25 and 30, supporters call for updates

Washington, DC (December 17, 2003) — Environmentalists agree that the beverage container deposit law, commonly known as the bottle bill has been a resounding success. “The law requiring small, refundable deposits on beverage containers is one of the most successful and popular environmental laws ever enacted,” said Pat Franklin, executive director of the Container Recycling Institute (CRI), a nonprofit organization that serves as a clearinghouse for information on container recycling and bottle bills.

“The bottle bill was initially adopted to reduce bottle and can litter”, said Sam Washington, executive director of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC), the group that led the initiative campaign in 1976. Washington, who is executive director of the 100,000 member MUCC, said “Bottle Bills have been an unparalleled success in that regard, but they have also kept hundreds of billions of beer and soft drink containers out of landfills over the past 30 years, saving taxpayers millions of dollars in trash disposal and curbside recycling costs.”

CRI research director, Jenny Gitlitz, contends that the global environmental benefits of recycling these containers are even more compelling than the local impacts of reducing litter and solid waste.

“Recycling the 52 billion aluminum cans trashed this year alone would have saved the energy equivalent of 16 million barrels of crude oil, or enough to supply over a million cars with gasoline for a year,” Gitlitz said. “Beverage containers are recycled in non-bottle bill states too, but only about 1 out of 4 are recycled, compared to 4 out of 5, on average, in bottle bill states.”

According to CRI, eight of the eleven bottle bill states are celebrating special anniversaries this year: Connecticut and Iowa enacted their laws 25 years ago. States celebrating implementation include Delaware, Massachusetts and New York (20 years), Maine and Michigan (25 years), and Vermont (30 years). “There is certainly cause for celebration,” said Franklin, “but there also a need to strengthen the existing laws.”

Supporters in New York, Michigan, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Iowa say they want to make a good thing better by updating their laws to cover beverages such as bottled water, teas, juice drinks and sports drinks. Pointing to two identical plastic beverage bottles, Betty McLaughlin, Environmental Affairs Director of Connecticut Audubon said, “The only difference between this Pepsi Cola bottle and this Pepsi Aquafina water bottle is ‘fizz.’ One deserves to be covered by the law as much as the other.”

Bottle bill advocates say the bottle bill works because the nickel deposit paid by consumers is refunded when the can or bottle is returned to a store or a local redemption center. "The bottle bill provides a 5 or 10-cent incentive to recycle," said Frank Procopio, owner of Central City Bottle Redemption Center in Syracuse, New York. According to Procopio, scout troops, churches and synagogues, and a host of other civic groups, use bottle and can drives to raise money for their organizations. "The West Genessee Marching Band averages about \$650 a month from the bottle and can drives they hold," he said.

According to CRI research director, Jenny Gitlitz, return rates for deposit containers have declined over the past 10 years, with the average return rate in states with a nickel deposit falling from 85% in the mid 1990's to below 75% today. "It's easy to understand this decline when you consider that a nickel in 1980 is now worth about 2.2 cents." Gitlitz points out that in Michigan, where the deposit is 10 cents, the return rate is above 95%.

Another update advocated by many bottle bill supporters would transfer the "unclaimed deposits" (deposits that are not claimed by the consumer) from the beverage distributors and bottlers to the state. According to Laura Haight, spokesperson for the New York Bigger Better Bottle Bill Coalition, "Over \$1 billion dollars in "unclaimed" deposits has ended up in the pockets of bottlers and distributors. "As return rates have dropped, these windfall profits have mushroomed," said Haight. "Those monies belong to the public and should be used to support recycling and other environmental programs," she said. According to CRI, state supreme courts in Michigan and Massachusetts ruled in 1989 that the unclaimed deposits were the rightful property of the state.

Litter surveys conducted by groups in New York and Massachusetts in 2001 and 2002, underscore the need for deposits on non-carbonated beverages. The surveys showed that containers without a deposit were 7-12 times more likely to be littered than deposit containers. Both New York and Massachusetts require deposits on beer and soft drink containers, but not on non-carbonated beverages.

Former State Senator Lois Pines, author of the Massachusetts bottle bill, claims that non-carbonated beverages such as bottled water, teas, fruit and sports drinks would have been included in the law had they existed in substantial quantities at that time. "The refundable deposit provides an incentive to recycle and a disincentive to litter, keeping our recreational areas and roadsides cleaner," she said. "The law should be expanded to include new beverages that weren't on the grocery shelves and in vending machines 20 years ago."

States celebrating special anniversaries this year:

Enactment Anniversary: Connecticut and Iowa (25 years)

Implementation Anniversary: Vermont (30 years), Maine and Michigan (25 years), Delaware, Massachusetts and New York (20 years).

Three other states have bottle bills: California, Oregon and Hawaii.

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