

It's Time to Wean the Beverage Industry off the Bottle (Deposit)

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Connecticut's "Bottle Bill" is 25 years old this year, and in the quarter century since its passage into law, we have come a long, long way.

The main goal of the Bottle Bill was to protect the environment by discouraging litter and encouraging recycling. The law succeeded on both counts—particularly on the recycling end—but with an unexpected twist: Connecticut is recycling more than the Bottle Bill's authors ever imagined. Much more.

In 1978, debate on the Bottle Bill was filled with dire predictions of its impact. So to aid dislocated workers in bottle manufacturing plants, special benefits were extended by the legislature. And to help cushion the blow on the beverage industry, a system was created whereby the bottlers and distributors were allowed to hold onto your unclaimed nickels.

In the Bottle Bill's infancy, it may have made sense to allow bottlers and distributors to offset the costs of complying with a new law. But after 25 years, and with the rapid growth of recycling, *it's time to wean the beverage industry off the bottle deposits.*

Today, recycling bins are as common on the curbside as garbage cans. Meanwhile, Connecticut's bottlers and distributors have been "banking" on *your* increased recycling—to the tune of millions of dollars every year—thanks to a system in which they became the first to collect, and the last to pay back, the nickel deposit.

Ask yourself this question: What did you do with the last soda bottle or can you used? Did you bring it back to the store to get your nickel back? Or did you toss it in the bin with your recyclables? Worse yet, did you throw it in the trash as some regretfully do?

According to a recent estimate, \$16.4 million worth of nickels are *not* making it back into your pocket. *What's more, you are paying twice for those unreturned bottles and cans.* How?

CRRA's four waste-to-energy facilities process very large amounts of the nickel-deposit containers. Based random counts, CRRA's Mid-Connecticut Project in Hartford receives an estimated 9 million to 12 million bottles and cans *each year* that could have been returned for the nickel deposit or recycled. Spread across CRRA's four resource recovery plants, that number reaches upwards of 30 million bottles and cans.

The boilers that turn your household garbage into steam and electricity were not intended to process these bottles and cans. Melted cans and heated glass create slag, which can cause operational problems and outages at these plants. Cans that combust also generate fly ash. Although that ash is captured in the baghouse that cleans the facility's air emissions, the slag, ash, and glass end up having to be landfilled. The result: You pay for unclaimed bottles and cans in your disposal fees.

Thankfully, many of the unreturned bottles and cans are being recycled. Each year, CRRA's recycling

centers in Hartford and Stratford accept and process very large amounts of unreturned bottles and cans. A recent audit at the Hartford recycling facility revealed that 60 to 70 percent of the recyclable plastic and 30 percent of the recyclable aluminum were nickel-deposit containers. We estimate similar numbers at our Stratford recycling center. *Yet still, the bottlers hold your nickel.*

As Connecticut's largest recycler, we believe that it is time to recognize this reality, repeal the "escheat cheat" system, and use the millions in unclaimed deposits to support recycling in all of Connecticut's cities and towns. That is what would happen under a bill currently before the state legislature—and the impact is substantial.

Such a system would be worth \$6.20 per ton in tipping fees now paid by the towns in our Mid-Connecticut Project; \$9.00 per ton in the Bridgeport Project; \$7.50 per ton in the Southeast Project; and \$6.70 per ton in the Wallingford Project.

Under the bill, CRRA—which is the only recycler in the state that *does not* charge a separate fee for recyclables—would receive the share of revenues for the towns we serve, funding recycling operations like our electronics recycling program, improving waste processing operations such as removing metals from your household garbage, and quality of life projects in the communities that host our facilities.

Some \$5.3 million in the unclaimed deposits would be distributed to support recycling operations in the non-CRRA towns.

The arguments being made by the beverage industry to cling to the old "escheat cheat" system—along with the millions of dollars it gives them—are the echoes of a bygone era, and they ring as hollow as an empty can.

We believe that by returning your bottle or can for your 5-cent deposit—or by using the unclaimed deposits to promote recycling—the Bottle Bill's original goal of protecting the environment will be better served.

Either way, it's your nickel.

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