FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING CONTAINER RECOVERY

Policy

The NRC supports deposit return systems for container recovery as a vital strategy to increase the collection and reclamation of clean materials for recycling into new materials.

Background

Container deposit and recycling legislation in the United States has traditionally been the legislative bailiwick of the states. Beyond the apprehension of the federal government to tackle the complicated issue, practical federal mandate considerations have also discouraged national legislation. A one-size-fits-all approach would be difficult for several reasons.

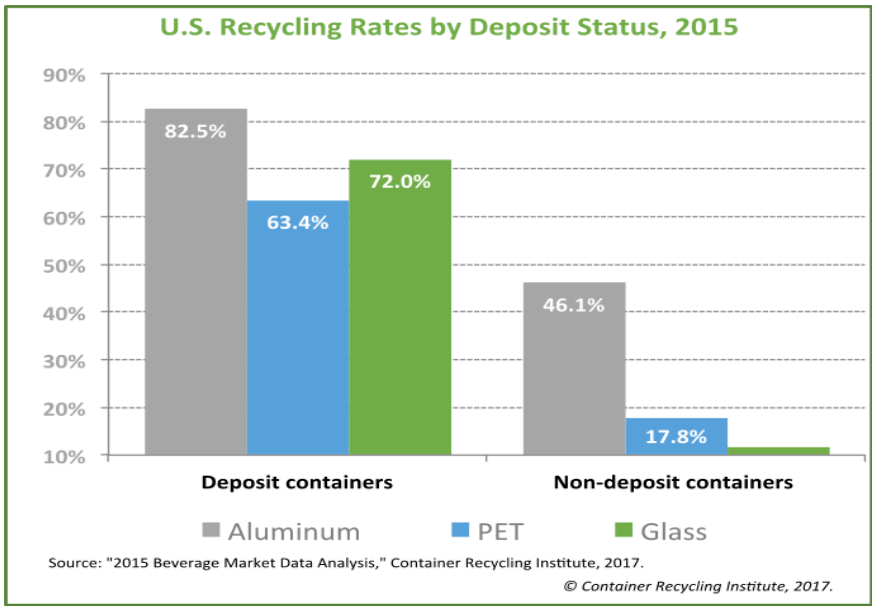
- The development and practicality of recycling differs a great deal from state to state.
- Therefore container return infrastructure has evolved in wildly different ways.
- Even among states with some degree of uniformity, we find differences in population density, demographics, and retail sales characteristics have required varied approaches to container recovery.
- Considerable differences in processing and marketing capacity exist from region to region.

These factors seem to reinforce a state-based approach.

The benefit of deposit laws are abundantly clear in container deposit states.

- Diversion of both container and volume quality is much higher. (See Figure 1)
- Quality of recycled materials is much better.
- Manufacturers using recycled content prefer materials from these states.
- Recycling generates several times more jobs per ton than disposal. So higher recycling rates brought about by deposit systems bring primary, secondary and beyond economic benefits.
- Twenty-percent of the states have container deposit laws serving approximately 27% of the US population.
- The container recycling rates in deposit states are two to three times higher than the average of container recycling rates in non-deposit states and represent roughly half of all beverage containers recycled in the US.

Figure 1



When it comes to litter, beverage containers contribute to pollution in our creeks, streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans, negatively affecting human and environmental health. Beyond our waterways and to where we grow and raise our food, even farmers report that litter harms and has even killed their livestock (through ingestion) and damages their equipment, thus adding costs to our nation's food production. Farm bureaus have gone on record as supporting container deposit return systems because of their proven track record of reducing beverage container litter.

According to multiple studies of state litter cleanup programs, it is not uncommon for states without container deposit return systems to have 20% or more beverage container related litter than states with container deposit return systems. Further, a recently published study in an academic journal found that beverage container litter was approximately 40% lower in coastal states with container deposit return systems than coastal states without. And the costs of litter removal programs are staggering. Keep America Beautiful estimates that litter cleanup costs businesses and communities over $11 billion each year. The actual amount of beverage container litter and associated costs are likely much higher due to flawed counting methodology and because the available cost data is incomplete.

Container deposit laws represent the essence of NRC's well-established Definition of Recycling and are consistent with the Guiding Principles of the organization. The NRC believes the changes in the national recycling environment justify renewed priority consideration of a national deposit law strategy. Even if the details of the deposit laws remain state-based, the benefits of deposits are clear and should be part of recycling systems across the country. The great challenge is determining what is most overall beneficial to the most people, states, and industry interests. The health and maintenance of the recycling industry, one of our nation's most valuable economic engines, demands it.

Rationale

One consistent bright spot for North American recycling has been the supply of materials coming from states with container deposits. These states produce a steady stream of high quality materials that are in high demand by manufacturers. Material from bottle bill states dependably commands top prices because bottle bill commodities diverted from paper and other recyclables prevent contamination which has dramatically reduced market prices and municipal revenue from the broader recycling stream.

The loss of overseas markets for American recyclables, high rates of contamination, and the need to develop domestic markets for recycling has necessitated the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) take a new look at container deposit legislation to improve the state of recycling in the United States. In the past, the NRC had taken no position on bottle bills because of the divergence of opinions among our coalition partners. Now, however, the time has come to revisit that issue. The national recycling landscape has changed a great deal since the initial recycling and container deposit legislation was passed nearly half a century ago and the NRC needs to respond to these new challenges.

The world of recycling has turned upside-down multiple times since the first Earth Day 50 years ago (1970). There have been significant 'breakthroughs' that promised improved collection and recovery, but there have been setbacks along the way that have caused upheavals that would leave communities and haulers scrambling to find a home for their recyclables much like the early days of curbside recycling.

Worldwide more regions, territories, and countries are recognizing that responsibly managing our resources is imperative not just for recycling but addressing pollution in the environment, particularly plastics in the ocean, as well. Twenty-one new deposit laws have been enacted since 2005. By 2017 roughly 300 million people are being served by container deposits. But in 2018, new container deposit laws enacted or announced have doubled that number. This staggering growth goes beyond being a trend and is a recognized movement to address recycling and pollution problems associated with beverage containers.

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Cross-reference: