

Rural, low-income Californians need recycling centers

calmatters.org/commentary/my-turn/2021/04/rural-low-income-californians-need-recycling-centers

By Guest Commentary

April 9, 2021



Photo via iStock

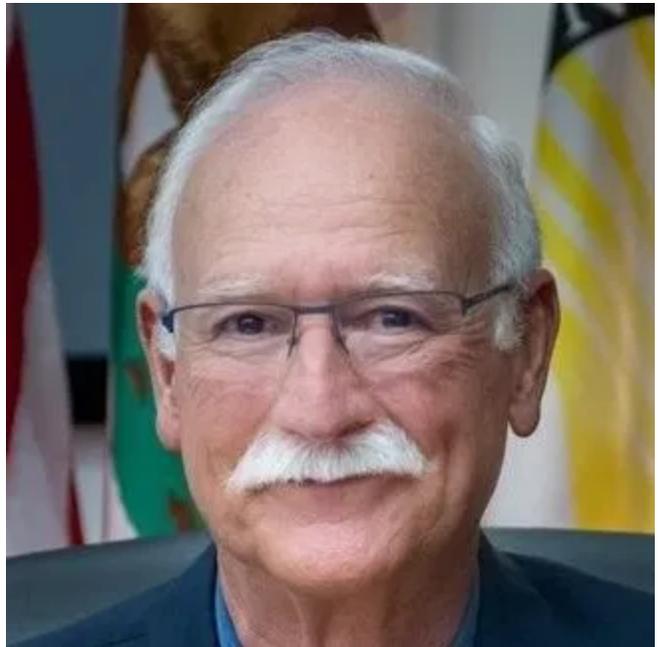
In summary

Nearly 1,000 California redemption centers have closed since 2015, leaving remote places like Humboldt County with no centers at all.



By Heidi Sanborn

Heidi Sanborn is chair of the California Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling, and executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council, heidi@nsaction.us.



Richard Valle, Special to CalMatters

Richard Valle is vice chair of the California Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling, and an Alameda County Supervisor, and president and CEO of Tri-CED Community Recycling, rvalle@tri-ced.com.

The public health crisis from which we are finally emerging has resulted in the permanent closure of countless restaurants, bars and hair salons. We can add recycling centers to that list, which has made it nearly impossible for some Californians to get cash for recycling their bottles and cans when they need the money the most.

Admittedly, many issues plagued the recycling industry before the pandemic, including low prices and few buyers for certain types of recyclable materials. Nearly 1,000 California redemption centers have closed since 2015, leaving remote places like Humboldt County with no centers at all.

Unfortunately, the closure of these facilities has left many Californians with no reasonable way to claim the cash they are owed for returning their recyclable cans and bottles. Under California's 30-year-old "bottle bill" recycling program, stores charge an extra 5 or 10 cents for most beverages in containers. Californians are promised their California Refund Value deposits back in cash when they return empty containers to recycling centers and some large grocery stores. But currently, some residents of rural or low-income areas can't redeem CRV deposits unless they drive for hours or stand in long lines – an example of the promise broken.

The pandemic has further reduced the number of CRV deposit redemption locations. Last year, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order that allowed grocery stores to stop accepting bottles and cans for recycling; it also allowed recycling centers to close to the public. This policy ended after it became widely understood that COVID-19 spreads through the air rather than on surfaces, but the damage was done: some closed centers never reopened, and some Californians still think that grocery stores no longer accept empty cans and bottles.

Beverage container redemption should be easier for all Californians, but it's particularly important for those who rely on cash from recycling to meet their basic needs. Obviously, the bottle bill is no substitute for robust anti-poverty efforts, but these vulnerable Californians especially deserve our swift action.

This is particularly true since \$120 million in unredeemed deposits have amassed in a state account over the past 14 months, all because Californians don't have enough locations where they can get their money back.

We recommend that these funds be used quickly. Our volunteer Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling unanimously called on the governor and Legislature to take emergency action authorizing Rachel Machi Wagoner, director of CalRecycle, the state department in charge of recycling, to use bottle bill funds to meet the needs of underserved and rural areas in a variety of ways. These include opening more recycling centers, adding reverse vending machines where people insert empty containers and get cash back immediately, allowing "bag drop" collection centers and other deposit redemption methods.

To be clear, we support calls for both legislative and regulatory reforms to the bottle bill. But while the Legislature has proposed bills to accomplish this, the substantial and surgical changes needed will take two to three years. The Californians who submitted comments to our commission are pleading for help and need a more urgent response.

Redemption programs like the bottle bill are intended to reduce littering, provide convenient recycling opportunities and help the environment. But when Californians cannot realistically get their money back, the “deposit” may look a lot like a tax – one that doesn’t even stop recyclable bottles and cans from ending up in landfills. By authorizing CalRecycle to direct the unclaimed deposits now, Newsom and the Legislature can provide much needed relief to deliver on convenient redemption.

Heidi Sanborn has also written about [updating California’s bottle bill](#).

We want to hear from you

Want to submit a guest commentary or reaction to an article we wrote? You can find our [submission guidelines here](#). Please contact Gary Reed with any commentary questions: gary@calmatters.org, (916) 234-3081.