

With recycling on pause, it's a good time to update California's bottle bill

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The coronavirus has changed how we live in ways that go far beyond what we associate with public health, such as returning bottles and cans for redemption. All states, including California, are struggling to adjust to the new recycling reality.

Gov. Newsom recently issued an executive order allowing grocery stores to stop accepting bottles and cans from customers for 60 days, while allowing recycling centers to close temporarily. The order responds to concerns about the virus spreading between essential industry workers and customers when giving refunds for returned beverage containers.

California should use this pause to upgrade the redemption process – as part of the coronavirus legislative response and budget negotiations – and improve this important and popular collection system.

Under the California program for getting cash back for empty bottles and cans – also known as the “bottle bill” – stores charge an extra 5 or 10 cents when people buy certain beverages. People then bring empty beverage containers to recycling centers and some

stores to receive refunds, which total more than \$900 million annually.

California's bottle bill program has been successful for more than 30 years, ensuring that widely used, easily recyclable materials like glass, aluminum and certain plastics are collected, recycled and manufactured into new products.

Unfortunately, the bottle bill has underperformed due to several long-standing and newly emerging problems. As a result, too many containers end up in landfills, which is expensive and unsustainable for municipalities and ratepayers. However, if California invests in the following key changes, the state can create a cleaner, safer and more convenient program:

1. Make it safe and easy for people to get their money back: Especially during the current economic turmoil and widespread unemployment, people should be able to get their redemption money quickly at safe and clean redemption sites. One way to do this is by locating redemption centers where customers already go. Grocery retailers should install reverse vending machines outside, where people can insert empty beverage containers and get cash back immediately, a process that is already successful in dozens of countries and is less expensive for retailers than paying fines for refusing to accept bottles and cans. Additionally, California should explicitly allow "bag drop" programs, where bagged beverage containers can be dropped off at special kiosks and recycling centers, as is done in Oregon, Maine and New York.
2. Rapidly implement Assembly Bill 54 pilot projects. California must distribute 2019 pilot program grant funds for mobile recycling centers and other pilot plans to serve areas where recycling centers have closed and few stores accept containers for redemption.
3. Protect 8,000 recycling jobs by protecting existing funds: Workers in the recycling industry have always been essential, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made that designation official. Therefore, the state must protect the approximately \$400 million in the bottle bill operation fund from efforts to siphon away that money for unrelated purposes as has happened in the past. This money, paid by California consumers, is needed for recyclers to operate and ensure that bottles and cans are recycled, not sent to a landfill.

Together, these changes will make container redemption cleaner, safer and easier for everyone. Additionally, the promise California made to return deposits is important to keep, especially to the most vulnerable low-income Californians who need to get their money back for basic necessities.

Besides being good policy, a bottle bill update gives Californians what we know they want – to get their money back. Changing Markets Foundation has recently released a report showing that updating the bottle bill can bring significant environmental benefits and new

jobs. Further, the report shares recent polling data that affirms that Californians would be more likely to recycle with more convenient, safer access to redeem their deposits.

Because of the public health crisis, many bills lawmakers proposed in January are delayed indefinitely. However, fixing California's bottle bill can reduce the chance of COVID-19 transmission while protecting recycling jobs and returning Californians' money at a time when they need it most. We urge the Legislature and the governor to act this year.

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