

ENVIRONMENT

Would a bottle bill work in RI? Advocates look to Oregon for the example



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PROVIDENCE – If there’s a model for policymakers as they consider the creation of a bottle bill aimed at boosting Rhode Island’s middling recycling rate, it may be Oregon.

The West Coast state was the first in America to create a redemption program for beverage containers in 1971, and a series of tweaks since then has seen it become the nation’s most effective.

Of all the bottles and cans covered by the Oregon program, 88.5% are being redeemed, the highest rate among the 10 states with bottle bills, according to The 50 States of Recycling, a nationwide analysis updated in December.

“This is really the best way to get back these containers and make sure they’re not littered in the environment,” former Oregon legislator Jules Bailey told a special General Assembly commission looking at ways to reduce plastic waste in Rhode Island.

Oregon saw big increase in recycling when it doubled deposits for bottles

Bailey served in the Oregon House of Representatives from 2009 to 2014 and went on to work for the Oregon Beverage Recycling Cooperative, the entity that manages the state’s bottle redemption program, most recently as CEO before leaving in October.

The Oregon program started out with a 5-cent deposit, and with consumers only able to return bottles and cans to retailers. But it’s evolved over the years to accept more types of beverage containers at more places, including standalone redemption centers and kiosks.

The biggest change that had the most impact came in 2017, when legislators doubled the container deposit to 10 cents, increasing the incentive for people to return their empties.

“There’s a pretty direct and linear relationship between the incentive and the amount of containers you get back,” Bailey said.

In the wake of the increase, the redemption rate shot up from about 64% to the current figure near 90%. Michigan, the only other state with a 10-cent deposit, has a rate in the mid-70s, according to the most recent figures. The rate in Maine, which has a two-tier deposit of 5 cents for most containers and 15 cents for spirits and wine bottles, is a little bit higher.

Bottle bills put onus on industry to recycle containers

Bottle bills are a form of what’s known as extended producer responsibility, a policy that puts the burden on companies to manage the waste their products generate. They work by charging a fee to consumers when they buy a beverage and then refunding them that money when the empty container is returned to be recycled.

More: Tons of recyclables end up in the landfill. What experts say is needed to fix the problem.

Of the 10 states with the highest recycling rates in the country, nine have bottle bills, according to The 50 States of Recycling. Their recycling rates range from 39% to 65%. In contrast, Rhode Island, which ranks 26th in the nation, has a rate of just 17%.

The difference can be seen with certain types of containers. Because glass bottles and jars that pass through the single-stream recycling system in Rhode Island get mixed with fiber, plastic and other material, none are recycled. Instead, they’re ground up and used as cover on the Central Landfill in Johnston.

In Oregon, however, bottles are collected by the recycling coop and kept free of other material, so they’re able to be recycled into new bottles. The recycling rate for glass bottles and jars in the state is 51%.

And while only 31% of bottles made of a type of plastic known as PET – the kind used for water and sodas – are recycled in Rhode Island, the number in Oregon is 71%

How does the bottle redemption program work?

So how does the Oregon program work? It's pretty simple. For every beverage a distributor delivers to a retailer, the retailer pays 10 cents. That 10 cents is then given to the recycling co-op, which holds it in escrow. When the retailer sells the beverage, the 10-cent fee is charged to the consumer. And when the consumer returns the empty container, the co-op refunds them the 10 cents.

There are other elements of the program that have helped Oregon increase participation. Consumers can choose to donate their refunds to charity, or collect them in college funds. Retailers give them a 20% bonus if they spend the money in-store when they make their returns.

Setting up a similar system in Rhode Island could take a while, but Bailey said that getting something off the ground could be done in three or four years. And while in Oregon retailers initially balked at the program, he said they quickly came around.

"That shifted relatively quickly over time," Bailey said. "For quite a while, the beverage industry has supported the bottle bill."