

Groups call for California bottle bill revamp

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Two advocacy groups and a consulting firm hired by them have prepared a 20-page report saying a “precipitous decline” in funding for California’s bottle bill has led to redemption rates falling from a peak of 85 percent to 66 percent in recent years. The bottle bill legislation has an 80 percent target rate.

The Changing Markets Foundation and National Stewardship Action Council (NSAC) commissioned the New York office of United Kingdom-based Eunomia Research & Consulting to assess the current status of the California Beverage Container Recycling and Litter Reduction Act (AB 2020), the state’s deposit and return bottle bill.

The resulting report, “Genie in a Bottle: Unlocking the full potential of California’s bottle bill,” examines the decline in the program’s redemption rate “and also looks at the opportunities to update California’s bottle bill to meet the desires of the overwhelming majority of Californians,” say the two groups. Polling conducted as part of the report found that 74 percent of the state’s residents “support doing more to reduce plastic pollution.”

According to Eunomia’s findings, “Redemption rates have declined primarily due to a 53 percent reduction in [the number of] recycling centers since 2013. From 2013 to 2019, more than 1,200 recycling centers closed, resulting from underfunding the centers.”

Since 53 percent of recycling centers have closed, the state-wide recycling rate has dropped by 10 percentage points, according to Eunomia. “Ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely accelerate this trend. If half of the remaining recycling centers close, the number of tons of beverage containers landfilled will rise by 30 percent,” forecasts the firm.

An early May California Resource Recovery Association webinar on “Beverage Container Redemption Challenges During COVID-19,” reported that in the first few weeks of California’s shelter-in-place orders, recycled beverage container volumes were down by 60

to 70 percent, say the advocacy groups.

Changing Markets and NSAC suggest “unlocking the Beverage Container Recycling Fund’s \$400 million in unspent funds, over the years, to start bringing the program to the best-in-class level.” The funds could be used to revitalize the program and work toward the goal of eventually collecting 96 percent of beverage containers for recycling, say the two groups’

Other suggestions in [the report](#) include “locating redemption centers where customers already go; allowing ‘bag drop’ programs and hands-free reverse vending machines; and expanding to include wine and liquor containers.”

According to a YouGov survey conducted for the Changing Markets Foundation in March 2020, more than one-third of Californians (37 percent) are not aware of the bottle bill and 53 percent say they never use redemption centers, says the foundation.

“California should seize the opportunity to update the bottle bill now—before the return system loses more recycling centers during the COVID-19 health crisis, and when the public needs their deposits back more than ever,” says National Stewardship Action Council Executive Director Heidi Sanborn.

Comments Nusa Urbancic, a campaigns director with Changing Markets, “Public opinion supports more action to address plastic pollution, and Californians say they would use the system more if redemption points became more convenient. Modernization of the bottle bill will also bring significant environmental benefits and reduce financial burden on public authorities that are spending half a billion dollars on cleanups.”

“When we reviewed the California program back in 2018, the key factor we identified to be contributing to declining return rates was the failure of the current program to ensure that there are sufficient convenient redemption points,” says Sarah Edwards, CEO of Eunomia North America. “The report also found that approximately 80 percent of recycling centers revenue is reliant on scrap prices for which it has no control over. Since our 2018 study was carried out, additional recycling centers have closed. If California wants a best-in-class recycling system that is integral to a circular economy, the current container recycling program needs reform.”