

State needs to fix recycling system

Californians and their political leaders pride themselves on being environmental leaders. But when it comes to reusing materials from beverage containers, the state is stuck in the 1980s — and even at that we're failing.

Editorial

California's bottle and can recycling program is broken.

The convoluted system should be completely revamped. Too much glass, aluminum and plastic is ending up in landfills and littering our streets. And many consumers aren't getting the container deposits they were promised, largely because grocers have little incentive to uphold their end of the original bargain.

Under the deal, struck more than three decades ago, stores that sell the beverages are supposed to take back the containers or ensure there are nearby recycling centers to accept them and refund consumers' nickel deposits.

But those centers are rapidly closing, in part due to declining market prices for the recycled materials. Cal-Recycle, the lumbering state agency that oversees California's recycling program, reports that nearly one-third of the 2,268 centers that were operating in 2015 have since closed.

Not surprisingly, that means fewer containers are being recycled. CalRecycle reports that only 75 percent of deposit containers were actually recycled in 2017, the lowest ratio in a decade.

Consumer Watchdog, a non-partisan advocacy group that has studied the state program, estimated in a March report that the recycling rate is actually lower than that. As a result, the group says, consumers are only redeeming about half of their deposits.

It's not surprising. We've made it so inconvenient to recover our nickels that fewer people are willing to do so.

proposals deserve serious consideration.

The key point behind his proposals is that our current system is all wrong. It started with grocers' disdain for taking back the containers they sell. From the onset, those stores didn't want the cost of handling and storing used bottles and cans.

But a lot has changed since 1987. For starters, as Wieckowski notes, other states and nations are using automated collection systems in stores that take up less room and don't require human attendants.

More significantly, it's time to shift the cost and recycling burden. The nine other states with redeemable deposit programs haven't seen the same decline in recycling rates as California, according to a 2017 report from the state Legislative Analyst's Office. That's in part because beverage distributors play a more significant role in those states and are responsible for most of the recycling cost. California should do the same, Wieckowski correctly argues. If distributors want to sell their products, they should ensure their containers don't dirty our environment — and any cost of doing so should be wrapped into the price of the product.

Finally, the deposit amounts should be increased to create greater consumer incentive for returning bottles and cans. And the deposit rules should be expanded to include containers of wine and distilled spirits, which are currently exempt.

But that can only happen after we fix the redemption system. It's not fair to charge a deposit of any amount and then make Californians travel hither and yon to get their money back.

What about those grocers who were supposed to offer recycling in their stores if there were no nearby recycling centers? Many have made a business decision to shirk their responsibility. The law allows them to pay a \$100 per day opt-out fee to the state, an amount that hasn't changed since the program started in 1987.

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After a failed attempt two years ago, state Sen. Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont, is again planning legislation to revamp California's recycling system. His

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