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Add Bottled Water To The List Of Redeemables

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In its 25 years of existence, Connecticut's bottle deposit law has done more to clean up the environment than even its most zealous supporters could have imagined. More than 20 billion bottles and cans have been taken out of the state's waste stream.

That's 20 billion beverage containers that weren't strewn along the sides of roads, tossed into flowerbeds, scattered in the sand dunes or otherwise scarring the landscape.

Twenty billion. It's almost too much for the mind's eye to grasp. So think of the bottles and cans in these terms: If all of them were laid end to end, they would circumvent the Earth's equator 76 times. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a lot of litter.

But as successful as the redemption law has been, it's grown long in the tooth. The time has come to dust it off and get it in sync with consumer trends. The beverage world has changed.

Although it once made sense to target only carbonated beverages, which is what most people drank before they began

paying attention to rotting teeth and childhood obesity, today's beverages of choice don't necessarily bubble.

In fact, it shouldn't surprise anyone who's been to a ballpark or a school fair lately that the sale of bottled water in Connecticut has overtaken the sale of soft drinks. In 2002, 369 million non-carbonated beverages were sold in plastic containers in the state. Of those, about 244 million, or two-thirds, were bottled water, according to the Container Recycling Institute.

Efforts to expand the redemption law (commonly called the bottle bill) to the entire universe of beverage containers have failed, largely because of vehement opposition from supermarkets, convenience stores and beer and soda distributors.

Their reasons can be boiled down to a few basics: The bottles leave a sticky mess and sickening odor, there isn't enough floor space in stores for additional machines and people can put their waste in curbside recycling tubs. To overcome some of their objections, Senate President Pro Tem Donald E.

Williams Jr. is trying a new tactic this year - he's proposed to add only bottled water to the list of redeemable beverage containers.

"The substantial growth of water bottle sales has contributed to unwanted and unsightly litter in our neighborhoods and has contributed to an alarming 40 million plastic bottles that are discarded into the trash daily in this country," said Williams, who underscored the illogic of Connecticut's law at a recent press conference by holding up identical plastic bottles, one filled with Pepsi and one with Aquafina water. The soda bottle can be redeemed for 5 cents; the water bottle isn't worth a plug nickel.

With Williams' backing, the water bottle bill will almost certainly be approved by the Environment Committee. Beyond that, its prospects are dicey. In past years, Democratic leaders regularly derailed the bottle bills, motivated by campaign contributions from the retailers' and wholesalers' PACs. The PACs are still in business, but the leaders are too new to have been bought off.

The other wild card is lobbyist Patrick Sullivan, who was a no-show at the Environment Committee's March 7 public hearing, along with his client, Coca-Cola, which bottles Dasani water. Eyebrows were raised. Asked about his absence, Sullivan would say only that he had grown weary of fighting this battle. Don't believe it. Lobbyists get paid big bucks not

to grow weary of fighting battles.

The speculation is that Sullivan has softened his opposition to the bottled water bill in exchange for a promise that the so-called escheats bill would be crushed like an empty Sprite can under an elephant's foot. Right now, unredeemed nickel deposits are kept by beer and soda bottlers. Under a plan offered by Gov. M. Jodi Rell (and others before her), the beverage industry would be required to turn the deposits over to the state.

The nickels must add up. Rell's balanced budget proposal relies, in part, on \$20 million generated each year by escheats.

Unlike many laws with unintended consequences, the bottle deposit law has worked exactly as designed. Parks and streets are cleaner than they otherwise would be. And the nickel deposits have been put to good use. For example, Cans for Kids, a nonprofit group, has donated \$300,000 to Connecticut Children's Medical Center, the result of 6 million bottles and cans being turned in.

The bottle deposit law makes good cents. Including plastic water bottles would make even more.

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