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Whose priorities?

by Pat Franklin and Jenny Gitlitz

Making real progress towards improving beverage container recovery efforts starts with expanding bottle bills.

A two-part article in the August and September issues of *Resource Recycling* ("Prioritizing recovery efforts, part 1 and 2") addressed falling beverage container recycling rates, and suggested opportunities for increasing recovery based on point-of-consumption data. The authors, who were consultants hired by the Beverage Packaging Environmental Council (BPEC) in 2004, acknowledged that relatively high recycling rates are being reached in bottle-bill states, where consumers pay a small, refundable deposit on beverage containers. They did not, however, explore opportunities to move the bar higher in those states, seeing far greater opportunities in non-bottle bill states where container recycling rates are one-half to one-third the rates in deposit states.

Formed in 2003, BPEC is a group of leading beverage manufacturers that came together to "focus on opportunities to advance responsible waste management practices for their containers." Members include Coca-Cola (Atlanta), PepsiCo (Purchase, New York), Nestlé WatersNA (Vevey, Switzerland), Anheuser-Busch (St. Louis), Miller Brewing Co. (Milwaukee), Coors Brewing Co. (Golden, Colorado) and Heineken NA (Amsterdam). The National Recycling Coalition (Washington) has been facilitating conversations between BPEC and various recycling industry stakeholders. The dialogue itself is a good first step, but does not reveal the part beverage companies intend to play in reversing the declining recycling rates and increasing container waste.

Why focus on beverage containers?

The tens of billions of packaged beverages Americans buy each year come at great environmental and social cost. In the process of mining ore, drilling for oil and manufactur-

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ing the containers, rivers are dammed in Central and South America, vegetation is removed, non-renewable resources such as bauxite and petroleum are mined, drilled and processed with resulting air and water pollution, indigenous peoples are displaced, and wildlife habitat is destroyed. Simply put, packaged beverage consumption at current recovery levels – about 33 percent of units sold overall in the U.S. – is not environmentally sustainable.

Ironically, the low recovery rate for beverage containers is not due to a lack of markets for the materials. On the contrary, used glass, aluminum and plastic containers command a high market value, and the demand by reclaimers and container manufacturers far exceeds the supply of post-consumer bottles and cans. The recycling industry is starved for a steady supply of high-quality glass, aluminum and plastic containers.

Where are beverage containers consumed?

The BPEC research indicates that two out of three of the 180 billion beverage containers sold annually (about 120 billion bottles and cans) are consumed at home. The remaining 60 billion are consumed away from home. Of that 60 billion, an estimated 23 billion (13 percent of the 180 billion consumed annually) are consumed in offices, 11 billion (six percent) in restaurants and bars, and 25 billion (14 percent) in people's cars, on beaches, in parks, at sports venues and in other public places. BPEC's data is proprietary though, and has not been made available for public scrutiny.

What programs does BPEC propose?

The authors write, "The findings suggest that we have to do a better job of what we already do – recover material from homes and workplaces" where approximately 80 percent of beverage containers are consumed. They explain, "Because bottle-bill states already have relatively high recovery rates for beverage containers, the analysis focused on increasing recovery in non-bottle bill states."

By limiting their proposed new programs to non-bottle bill states, they are targeting only 57 percent of the total beverage market, as they are focusing on only at-home and workplace consumption (80 percent of total sales) of the non-bottle bill U.S. population (71 percent.)

Residential. In the September article, the authors proposed a menu of programs to expand and improve curbside recycling in non-bottle bill states. They claim that these efforts would increase beverage container recovery by "roughly 1.9 million tons (20 percentage points)." That would boost the national beverage container recycling rate from 25 percent to 41 percent when measured on a weight basis, not a unit basis.

Table 1 **Increasing curbside recycling recovery by 1.9 million tons**

12,400,000	Tons of beverage containers sold
25 percent	Recycling rate (by weight)
3,165,000	Tons recycled
1,900,000	Increased recovery from curbside
5,065,000	New total with increased curbside recovery
41 percent	New recycling rate (by weight)

Source: Container Recycling Institute, 2006

Office. The authors suggest that with a substantial commitment to office recycling in businesses with 20 or more employees in 15 selected metropolitan areas in non-bottle bill states (excluding restaurants, bars, hotels and construction industries), about 18,000 tons of containers could be recovered for recycling annually. That effort would increase beverage container recovery by approximately two-tenths-of-one-percent on a weight basis.

On-premises. The authors make no suggestions for recovering the estimated 11 billion beverage containers consumed at bars, restaurants and hotels (six percent of total sales), even though they comprise a smaller percentage of the waste stream than containers consumed at offices (13 percent).

Cars/Other. The 25 billion containers (14 percent of total sales) that end up in cars, on beaches, in parks, at sports venues and other public places are clearly the most difficult to recover for recycling. However, because they are also at the highest risk to end up as litter, they should certainly be targeted for recovery. BPEC has not targeted this segment, either.

Bottle-bill states. The authors propose no new programs for the estimated 10 billion deposit containers (containers covered by the bottle bill) that are not recycled either through the deposit-refund system or a curbside recycling collection program. Nor do they propose targeting the approximately nine billion non-carbonated beverage containers sold in bottle-bill states that are not currently covered by existing deposit laws.

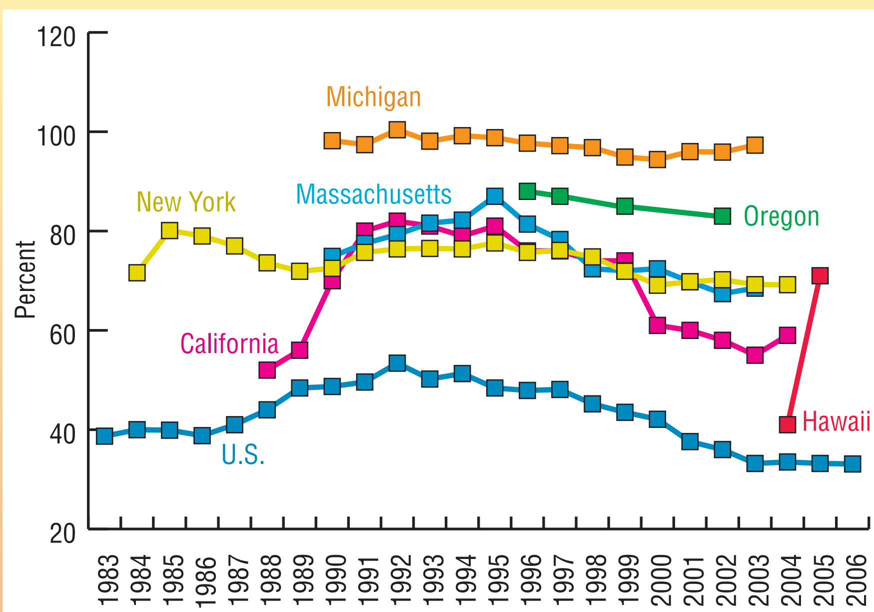
When will programs be implemented?

The researchers are silent on the subject of when or how the proposed programs might be implemented, and do not mention recycling goals. Without a timeline and concrete, achievable goals, the success of these efforts cannot be measured.

Who will pay?

The BPEC consultants indicate that increas-

Figure 1 **Beverage container redemption rates in selected deposit states**



Source: Container Recycling Institute, 2006.

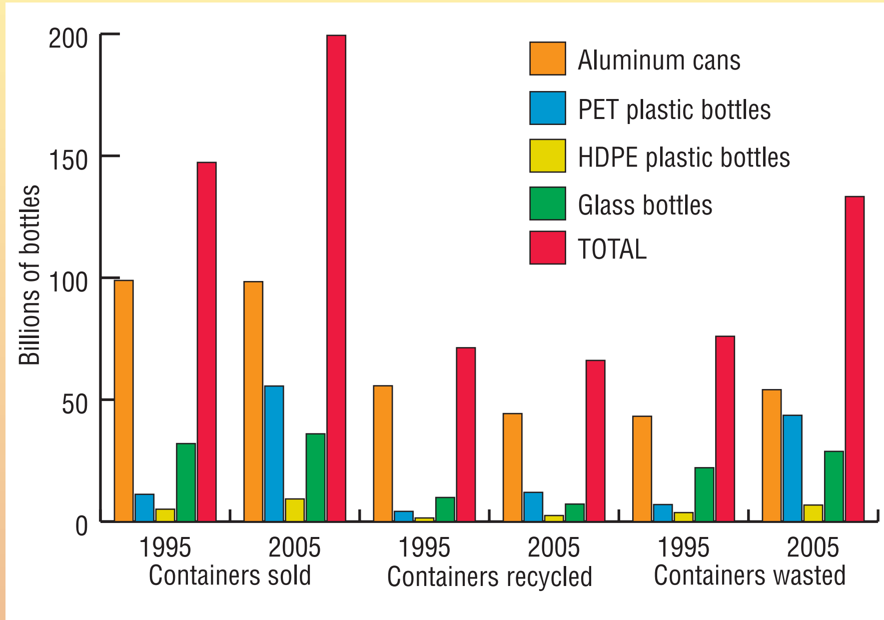
ing recovery of containers consumed at home would involve "significant up-front financial support" from all stakeholders and that "partnerships and investments by local governments, businesses and processors in each metro area" will be needed to "build programs to effectively capture...containers" in the workplace. Nowhere is there any mention of beverage producers funding these efforts. The question of "Who pays?" remains unanswered.

The efficacy and capture rates of curbside recycling collection programs needs to improve and workplace recycling should be encouraged, but let's talk about the elephant in the room for a minute. If recovery rates in bottle-bill states are so high, shouldn't the strategy for increasing national recycling rates be to replicate their success by implementing bottle bills in the 39 states that do not currently have them?

If the beverage industry – led by Coke, Pepsi and Anheuser-Busch – ceased lobbying against bottle bills, these recycling mechanisms would stand an excellent chance of passing in Arkansas, Tennessee, Washington and West Virginia. Container recycling rates could double overnight, with little or no government involvement, and without the need to convince tens of thousands of towns and cities to change the way their curbside collection programs are administered, or to pass mandatory laws governing recycling in the workplace.

Container-deposit systems rely on producer responsibility rather than government financing. Many local governments are cash strapped, while beverage brand owners and their regional distributors and bottlers enjoy huge profits from the sale of billions of one-way containers. It is only right that they, rather than taxpayers, foot the cleanup bill. Industry can decide whether or not to pass cleanup and recycling costs on to their customers.

Figure 2 **Beverage containers sold, recycled and wasted in 1995 and 2005 (in billions)**



Source: Container Recycling Institute, 2006.

As the authors of the first article point out, "Companies spend millions of dollars to understand what consumers want and how they can improve their products to get a leg up on their competitors." It's time for beverage producers to step up to the plate and invest the tens of millions of dollars needed to radically revamp recycling in non-deposit states, and perhaps to aim for a recycling rate of 45 percent or 55 percent – still a failing mark in most grade books. If a B+ or A- is the goal, beverage producers can stop their assault on bottle bills, and allow new deposit laws to be passed and existing ones to be expanded.

With bottle bills in every state, the national beverage container recycling rate could move up from 33 percent to 80 percent or higher. Such an increase would put the U.S. well on its way to zero beverage container waste, making packaged beverage consumption more sustainable. **RR**

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