

Beverage Companies Embrace Recycling, Until It Costs Them

They have pledged to help fix U.S. recycling, but for decades the companies have fought against “bottle bills,” which result in more bottles and cans being recycled but are costly for the industry.



By **Michael Corkery**

Recycling is struggling in much of the United States, and companies like Coca-Cola say they are committed to fixing it.

The beverage industry helps pay for pizza parties celebrating top elementary school recyclers and lends money to companies that process used plastic. Coca-Cola and Pepsi, along with Dow, the plastics producer, support nonprofit groups like Keep America Beautiful, which organize events like litter cleanups. A recent video funded partly by Keep America Beautiful featured models dancing through a recycling facility in Brooklyn, which one advertising writer said makes “recycling sexy.” By 2030, Coca-Cola wants all of its packaging to be made from at least 50 percent recycled content.

But one approach to recycling that many of these companies do not support has proved to actually work: container deposit laws, more commonly known as bottle bills, which cost them lots of money.

In the 10 states where consumers can collect a few cents when they return an empty bottle or can, recycling rates for those containers are often significantly higher. In some cases, they are more than twice as high as in states without such deposits.

For decades, beverage companies, retailers and many of the nonprofit groups they control have fought to kill bottle bill proposals across the country — with great success. Since 1987, only one state, Hawaii, has passed a bottle bill. This year, such measures have been proposed in at least eight states. Nearly all have been rejected or failed to gain traction.

The result? Recycling in much of the country still depends almost entirely on the good will of consumers to place their used containers in a bin for pickup. The process is convenient, but means millions of bottles and cans head straight to a dump instead.

[As costs skyrocket, more cities in the United States are stopping recycling.]



A music video funded by Keep America Beautiful features fashion models dancing through a recycling facility in Brooklyn. V Magazine, via YouTube

The financial reason for such opposition is clear. If the other 40 states were to adopt expansive bottle bills, it could ultimately cost the industries billions more. The beverage industry says the bills function like a tax and allow governments to collect millions in unclaimed deposits. Beverage distributors, in many cases, also pay a handling fee for the processing of empty containers.

“I am confident that the industry’s true rationale for opposing deposit laws is that they cost them money and they don’t want the expense,” said Susan Collins, president of the Container Recycling Institute, a research and advocacy group that supports bottle bills.

Most recently, in Connecticut last month, the industry helped to soundly defeat a bill that would have expanded deposits to juice and energy drink bottles, along with soda and beer.

“It’s like Groundhog Day all over again,” Chris Phelps, state director of the advocacy group Environment Connecticut, told a local newspaper shortly after the measure was defeated in the state legislature. “Every year when it comes to the bottle bill, every year, no progress is made, despite a lot of effort, a lot of work, a lot of recognition of the need to make progress.”

Facing public pressure over its contribution to plastic pollution in the ocean and the problems with many municipal recycling systems, the beverage industry has released broad statements in recent weeks suggesting a new openness to bottle bills.

In response to questions from The New York Times about the industry’s lobbying efforts, the American Beverage Association said in an email that while it had opposed bottle bills “in the past,” it was “open to any ideas” that would create more recycled plastic.

“This includes a deposit or fee on our containers,” the trade group said.

The industry argues that bottle bills address only one source of plastic waste — soda and water bottles. Beverage companies and retailers say they want to increase recycling rates for all types of plastic, including yogurt containers and food pouches that would be excluded from deposit laws.

Bottle bill supporters acknowledge that the systems have flaws, but blame retailers and bottlers for opposing attempts to modernize them.

“It gets to the larger question about recycling as a whole,” said Darryl Young, a former board member of the National Recycling Coalition. “Is it really just a way for manufacturers to avoid responsibility for their waste?”

Years ago, the National Recycling Coalition considered merging with Keep America Beautiful. Mr. Young said he voted down the deal partly because of concerns about the agenda of the group's corporate donors.

“They want to help,” Mr. Young said, “but on their own terms.”



Sorting bottles at a Tennessee facility. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

‘Let That Dog Lie’

Laura Turner Seydel, an environmental advocate and daughter of the media mogul Ted Turner, started a group called Atlanta Recycles in 2005 after learning about what seemed like an absurd conundrum.

Recycling rates in Georgia were so low that local carpet manufacturers, a large user of recycled plastic, were forced to import the material from outside the state, even though Atlanta is home to the headquarters of Coca-Cola, one of the world's largest producers of plastic bottles.

This winter, Ms. Seydel said, she witnessed why, 14 years after she founded Atlanta Recycles, little has changed.

"It exemplified why the wheels are coming off recycling," she said.

In January, some members of the group — made up of business leaders, government officials and environmentalists — were briefed on a \$4 million investment that the Coca-Cola Foundation was making in the city. Coca-Cola, the group learned, had chosen Atlanta to showcase its "World Without Waste" campaign, which centered on increasing collection rates of bottles and cans.



Laura Turner Seydel. Paul Morigi/Invision for United Nations Foundation, via Associated Press

The company, through a group called the Recycling Partnership, would pay for city workers to comb through residential recycling bins and leave behind “inspirational scorecards” marking which items could be recycled and which belonged in the trash. The program had been tested successfully on a smaller scale.

Someone in the meeting floated another idea: Why not explore the idea of a bottle bill in Georgia?

The proposal was quickly shot down. Several members of the group expressed concern that pushing for a bottle bill could jeopardize the funding from Coca-Cola. The message, Ms. Seydel recalled, was “you better let that dog lie.” The discussion at the meeting grew heated. Ms. Seydel and others argued that bottle bills were proven methods to increase collection rates of used plastic.

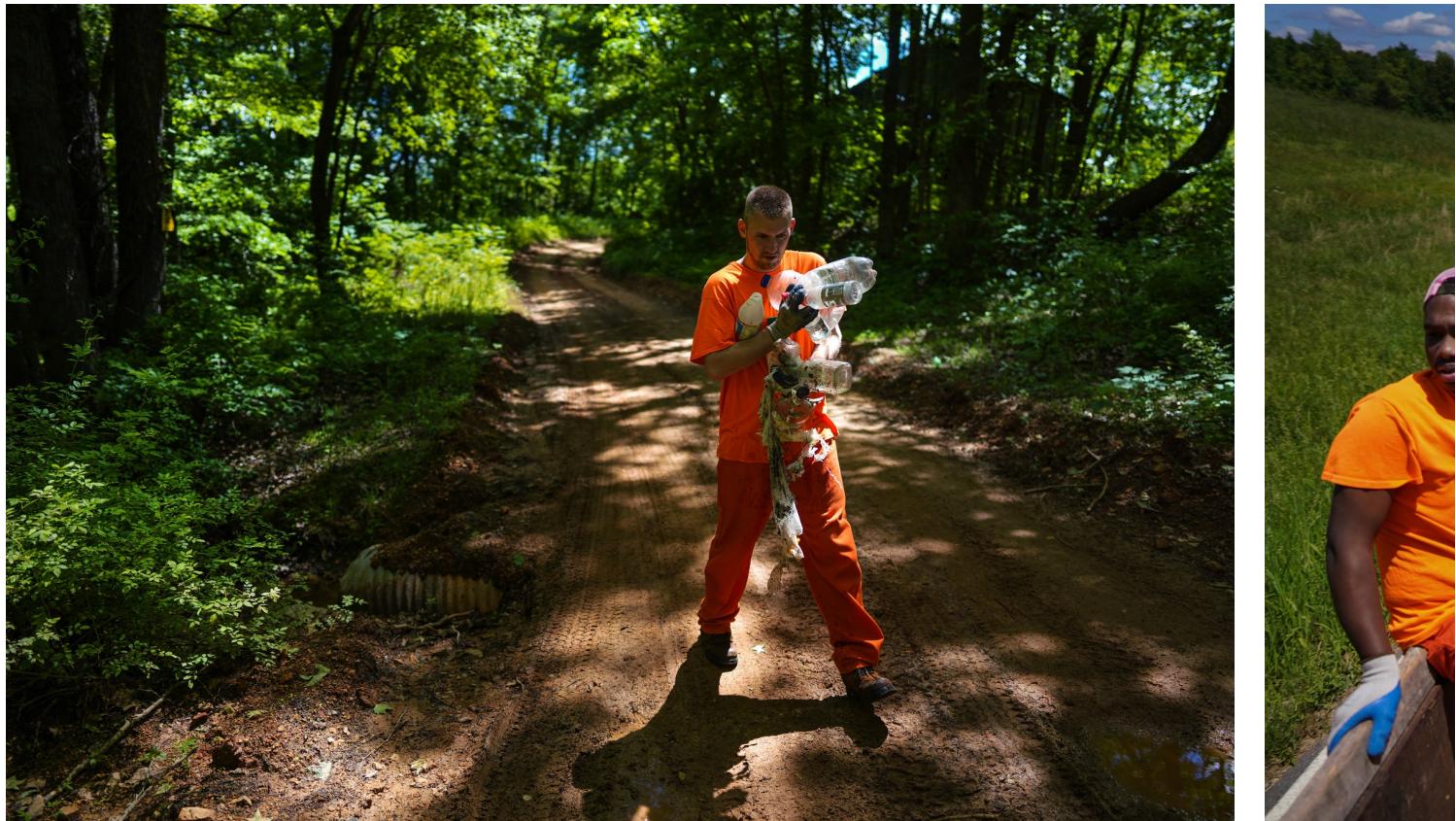
Kanika Greenlee, the city’s environmental programs director, had come prepared with a statement from Coca-Cola, making clear its opposition to deposits. Bottle bills were inconvenient and costly, the company said.

Ms. Greenlee, who through a spokeswoman declined to comment, holds several roles related to recycling in Atlanta. She works in the city’s public works department, but she also serves on the national board of directors of Keep America Beautiful alongside executives from Coca-Cola, Dr Pepper, Pepsi and the American Chemistry Council, a trade group for chemical and plastics companies.

A spokesman for Keep America Beautiful, which the packaging industry helped create in 1953 to combat litter, said the group had a “neutral” position on bottle bills and that “all options at this point need to be on the table” to improve recycling.

In a statement, Coca-Cola said company policy positions were independent of its foundation's donations, adding that the grant had already been awarded when the Atlanta Recycles meeting took place.

"We are open to exploring a variety of strategies to achieve our goal of recovering and recycling the equivalent of a bottle or can for every one we sell by 2030," Coca-Cola said, adding that it found curbside recycling was "one of the most effective and convenient recycling solutions for consumers."



Most days, inmates fan out across Tennessee, picking up roadside litter.

Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

A small tax pa

Chang W. Lee/T

'A Superior Strategy'

Empty bottles have vexed the beverage industry for more than a century. They are "the monstrous evil that saps the life from an otherwise prosperous trade," The National Bottlers Gazette wrote in 1882.

Back then, beverage companies desperately wanted their bottles back because the glass containers were so expensive to make. The companies even conducted raids on homes to retrieve their used containers from housewives who used them to store ketchup and medicine.

By the 1980s, however, mass-produced plastic made bottles inexpensive — and people rarely reused them. They often ended up being tossed on the side of the road, and the beverage companies simply made more of them.

Bottle bills were passed partly in an effort to reduce this kind of litter. But states like Tennessee, New Jersey and Washington settled on an alternative. In Tennessee, beverage companies agreed to pay a small tax in order to fund litter pickup efforts, education programs and handouts promoting recycling.

There was another bonus. In many parts of the state, inmates would perform the daily litter cleanup, keeping costs low and rewarding good behavior in the county jails. The tax revenue pays for salaries and other expenses of county sheriffs overseeing the litter crews, like lunch from McDonald's for the inmates.

“It makes the time go easier,” one inmate, Miko Coleman, 29, said as he picked up trash along a quiet country road this spring.

But the money — and the cleanup crews — would go away if Tennessee enacted a bottle bill, according to a provision in the law. That has made it difficult for bottle bills to gain traction politically.

“I have to hand it to the industry, they have a superior strategy,” said Marge Davis, a writer and conservationist, who has been proposing a bottle bill in Tennessee nearly every year since 2004.

Ms. Davis says the litter pickup helps to beautify roads, but does not get at the core issue of recycling more bottles and cans. And even though her bottle bill proposal would find a new funding source for roadside cleanups, she has had a

hard time convincing lawmakers.

At times, Ms. Davis' efforts faced another opponent — the group Keep Tennessee Beautiful. Like the work crews, Keep Tennessee Beautiful derives much of its funding from the tax money.



Marge Davis. Alysse Gafkjen for The New York Times

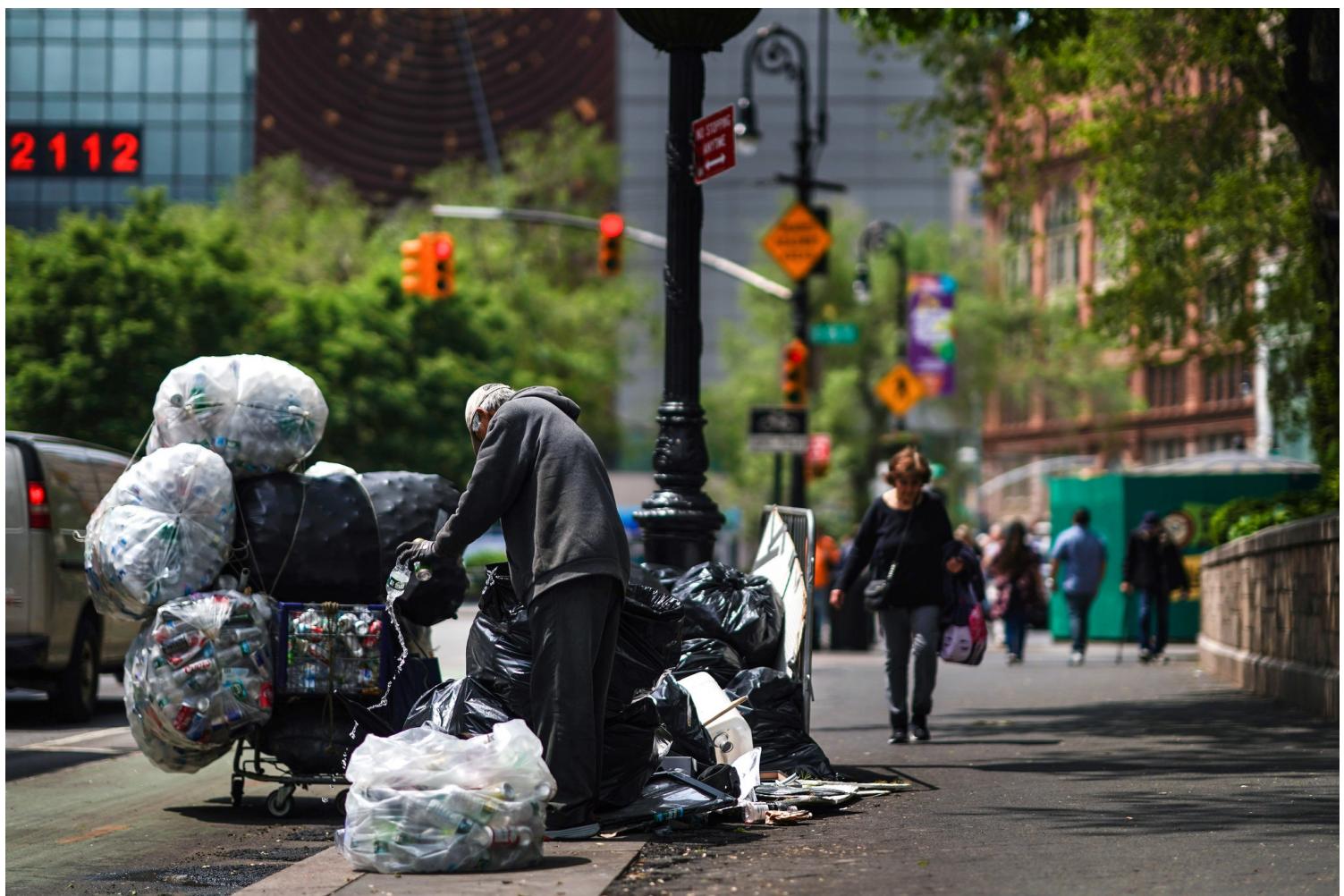
Keep Tennessee Beautiful's organizational values, according to its website, include "personal responsibility" and "policy based on fact."

For several years, the group circulated research and spoke out against bottle bills. Their argument, presented in a two-page white paper in 2002, mirrored the beverage industry's position closely. Stopping litter and encouraging recycling are best done through education, it said, not through 5-cent deposits.

"Funds should go for prevention education," the white paper states. "Teach the child and retrain the adult."

Missy Marshall, who has been executive director of Keep Tennessee Beautiful since 2013, said her group does not currently have an official position on deposits, but she worries about upending funding for a system that is successfully reducing litter.

"What we don't think is a positive step is to undo what we are doing," she said.



A man in New York, which has a bottle bill law, collecting containers to recycle.

Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Lobbying Power Unleashed

One of the industry's chief criticisms of bottle bills is that they deprive municipal recycling programs of valuable scrap material like aluminum cans. Selling this material helps offset the cost of processing items that are less valuable.

This argument has gained particular credence among environmental groups and municipalities after China put strict limits on the amount of plastic scraps that it imports from the United States. The policy shift in China led to a glut of used plastic and paper around the country, forcing some communities to burn or bury material they cannot offload.

In Washington State, Sen. Christine Rolfes thought she had come up with a comprehensive solution. This winter, Ms. Rolfes introduced a bill that she said was intended to hold all plastic packaging manufacturers responsible for the recycling of not just plastic soda and water bottles, but also harder-to-process plastics like takeout containers and packaging wrap.

Representatives of roughly 20 companies and trade groups testified against the bill, including a group called the American Institute for Packaging and the Environment, whose members, according to its website, include ExxonMobil's chemical division and Pepsico.

"They pretty much represented the entire economy," Ms. Rolfes said of the bill's many opponents. "It was insidious."

After several revisions, the current version of the bill no longer holds plastic manufacturers responsible for recycling.

The bill, which has been signed into law, now directs a state agency to study different approaches to recycling plastic packaging. The report is due by October 2020.



The money for the inmate crews in Tennessee would go away if the state enacted a bottle bill.
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

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