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# Is this the year for a bottle bill in New Hampshire?

BY: **AMANDA GOKEE** - JANUARY 21, 2022 5:52 AM

 Proponents of the bottle bill cite the state's landfill issues as a major reason to pass the measure. (Dana Wormald | New Hampshire Bulletin)

Past attempts to pass a bottle bill in New Hampshire have failed, but proponents of the policy think this year could be different, citing a groundswell of public awareness and environmental concern around how the state deals with solid waste.

This year's proposal – [House Bill 1652](#) – would establish a 10-cent deposit on beverage containers, including drinks like beer and soda that come in aluminum cans and glass bottles, plastic water bottles, and glass wine and liquor containers. You can reclaim the dime when you redeem the bottle – a measure meant to reduce roadside litter and increase recycling rates.

Successful programs in the country have reached return rates of nearly 90 percent – leaving 10 percent of the unclaimed deposit money to fund other initiatives.

According to the Container Recycling Institute, an organization that advocates in favor of the policy, states with bottle bills have recycling rates that are as much as three times higher than those without them. But bottle bills have faced decades of opposition from grocers and the beverage industry, who say the program would be costly, complicated, and harmful to business. At a public hearing on HB 1652 Tuesday, Kevin Daigle, vice president of the New Hampshire Grocers Association, opposed the bill, which he said would deter out-of-staters from buying drinks in New Hampshire. The New Hampshire Beverage Association and the New Hampshire Beer Distributors Association were also opposed.

“For over 40 years, the New Hampshire Legislature has decided against implementing refundable deposit mandates because industry has voluntarily developed better and more successful ways to address the issues of litter, solid waste reduction, and recycling education programs,” Daigle said on Tuesday.

Supporters of the measure in New Hampshire say it’s needed to keep material out of landfills and address what they see as a solid waste crisis facing the state. The North Country has been leading that conversation, after a proposal for a new landfill in Dalton ignited a [statewide debate](#) about how the state deals with garbage and protects the environment. Those efforts have spilled over into this legislative session with even more momentum – and a spate of bills from a North Country coalition made up of Sen. Erin Hennessey and Reps. Tim Egan, Troy Merner, Edith Tucker, and Linda Massimilla. Area organizations that mobilized to fight the Dalton landfill, including Save Forest Lake, the Forest Lake Association, and the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, have been involved, too.

The bottle bill is one proposal to come from that group, said Egan, a Sugar Hill Democrat, who is sponsoring the bottle bill. His goal is to reduce waste that’s heading for the landfill and protect the environment, which is a major draw for tourism in the state, a \$6 billion a year sector. And, Egan said, it’s about protecting the North Country, one of the state’s most rural areas. “What we’re seeing is legislators who understand the impact that solid waste has on the North Country. Right now, the mindset of the state is, ‘Oh, we’ll just put the trash up into the North Country and no one will care.’ Well, people care. We live here. We work here. We raise our kids here. We have our companies here,” he said.

### **‘The landscape is very different right now’**

The issue of solid waste extends well beyond the North Country. Marc Morgan, who works for the city of Lebanon as the solid waste manager, runs a landfill that serves 22 towns. He thinks a bottle bill would work, decreasing the number of bottles and cans that end up in the trash.

“My primary job is to make sure this landfill lasts as long as possible for the citizens of Lebanon and the Upper Valley. Removing anything from the landfill extends its life and is a benefit for future residents,” he said.

Morgan has seen bottle bills fail in the past – and recalls the state attempting similar legislation at least 30 times, much of which he credited to Hopkinton’s Derek Owen, who died in 2020. Owen served 10 terms in the New Hampshire Legislature and would perpetually file bottle bills, tweaking them from one session to the next, Morgan said.

Opposition to those bills has been going on just as long. Daigle, the vice president of the New Hampshire Grocers Association, pointed to New Hampshire’s 40-year record of voting down this proposal, which he said would reduce sales, create unsanitary storage of bottles, and place a greater burden on low-income residents. But Morgan thinks times have changed.

“I think the landscape is very different right now. The state of New Hampshire is really keyed up on solid waste issues,” he said.

Advocates from the North Country agree. “The court of public opinion around this is overwhelming,” said Tom Tower, who is on the board of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change. Tower said that although legislative efforts to instate a buffer between landfills and state parks failed last session, it increased awareness in the Legislature.

And the landscape beyond New Hampshire is shifting as well. Reagan Bissonnette, the executive director of the Northeast Resource Recovery Association, a nonprofit that helps municipalities and businesses recycle, said that while beverage industry groups have traditionally opposed these bills, that’s changing among companies working with glass. The Glass Packaging Institute, a nationwide group, now supports bottle bills as a way to increase glass recycling. A report issued by the institute last year showed that states with a bottle bill average glass recycling rate of 63 percent, versus 24 percent in states without a bottle bill. The institute’s goal is to reach a U.S. recycling rate of [50 percent](#) by 2030.

But glass is a particularly difficult material to recycle; it breaks easily and it’s heavy, which makes it expensive to transport. Municipalities usually end up having to pay for it to be removed, costing them around \$40 a ton, according to Bissonnette, unlike aluminum that can be sold for around 47 cents per pound.

“States with a bottle bill have a really great system for collecting a very pure supply of glass. And then that glass actually has value and has a positive financial value to get recycled into new glass bottles and jars, whereas right now communities in New Hampshire are typically paying money in order to recycle their glass,” Bissonnette said.

## The road ahead

New Hampshire is an outlier in the region, as one of just two New England states without a bottle bill (Rhode Island is the other). Nationally, however, only 10 states have a bottle bill in place. Bissonnette said it’s not surprising that so many bottle bill states are clustered in New England, where the cost of trash disposal is the highest in the country. There’s not a lot of free space for landfills and groundwater is close to the surface.

“I think that part of the reason why you see more New England states being more aggressive with trying to increase recycling rates is because you want to preserve that valuable landfill

capacity,” Bissonette said.

But just because our neighbors are doing it doesn't mean New Hampshire will follow suit.

Rep. Howard Pearl, a Loudon Republican, is chairman of the House Environment and Agriculture Committee that heard testimony on the solid waste bills. While Pearl agreed that the Legislature should act on solid waste, he said there were concerns about implementing a bottle bill that would take a lot of thought and work to resolve. “I don't think it's something we could push through the way it is,” he said.

The bill would make the Department of Environmental Services responsible for administering the program – and the department says it doesn't have the staff or resources to take it on. Money from the bottle bill could go to the department, but the draft discussed on Tuesday instead sent half the money to the state's general fund and the other half to the state recycling fund.

“We believe that that funding may be better placed to use as resources that would be necessary to implement this bill,” said Michael Nork, a recycling and waste management specialist who works for the Department of Environmental Services. Nork said resources would be needed to help the Solid Waste Management Bureau, as even keeping up with its current responsibilities has been a challenge. DES did not take a position on the bill, and Nork said the department supports increasing recycling rates.

Still, Egan and Morgan are optimistic that the timing is right, and that the bottle bill could ride through on a bipartisan wave of environmental concern.

“I do think what we are seeing now is a really big shift in the way people see waste issues,” Morgan said.

Egan called it a generational change. “Folks are ready, willing and able to make change in the state and safeguard their forests, whether they're hunters or hikers. They all want to walk through a clean forest and enjoy their time in the outdoors.”

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