

Hello, my name is Ryan Castalia. I'm the Executive Director of Sure We Can, New York City's only nonprofit serving canners—those who collect and redeem bottles and cans to earn income. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today. As the threats and consequences of climate change and global pollution become more and more evident and unavoidable, it's heartening to hear new conversations about what can be done, and who will be accountable. The “out of sight, out of mind” approach to waste management is no longer feasible, and it's time to attend to what actually works!

New York State's Returnable Container Act, or Bottle Bill, is an incredible success story. Like other Bottle Bills in the United States and across the world, it has led to waste diversion rates for the materials it covers that surpass, by far, most municipal recycling systems. In New York, work done under the Bottle Bill reduces street litter by 70%, and in 2020 helped recycle 5.5 billion bottles and cans, over 200,000 tons, at no cost to local governments. The state even earns income from deposits that go unredeemed. Importantly, the Bottle Bill also helps some of New York's most marginalized and underserved people earn crucial income, essentially working as freelance recyclers who capture what falls through the cracks of municipal systems.

The Bottle Bill is an extant, and effective, example of Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, the notion that producers ought to bear the financial and logistical burdens of the waste their products create. We've heard arguments that Bottle Bill expansion is a distraction from pursuing holistic EPR in New York State. We feel this couldn't be further from the truth. The Bottle Bill is EPR, and it works! Rather than shifting direction to create new and unwieldy systems that cede oversight and control to profit-motivated producers over the state and the people it represents, we should expand the scope of what is already working, and reap the rewards of higher recycling rates, greater community participation in recycling, and greater community benefit in the form of less litter and more income for underserved people. The narrative of distinction between the Bottle Bill and EPR is one that creates confusion on all sides, and only benefits those who stand to gain from a system that is more obscure, exclusive, and expensive.

Bottle deposits work because they empower normal people to engage directly with sustainability and recognize the real value, for themselves and for society, of materials and the act of recycling. As governments look to expand the scope of what's recyclable and how recycling can best be performed, this time-tested and incomparably effective model can be made even more potent. Unfortunately, today, the Bottle Bill is out of date. The 5-cent deposit on beverages, enacted in 1983, is not enough to encourage public participation or to support the stigmatized workers who depend on it for income. Entire categories of beverage containers, like juice, coffee, wine, and liquor, are not included. In New York, the bottle deposit should be raised from 5 cents to 10 cents. The handling fee that supports community redemption centers like ours should rise from 3.5 cents to 5 cents. All beverage containers should carry the deposit. The work, and workers, that have kept our streets clean from bottle and can litter for decades should be recognized and nurtured. A bigger, better Bottle Bill is just the beginning—this model can be a basis for working with all kinds of containers and materials, pointing the way to a more empowered and sustainable society for everyone. Thank you.