

Poll reveals the Bottle Bill to be wildly popular

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On Thursday, the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) officially launched the Bigger, Better, Bottle Bill Campaign with the release of polling results revealing the wild popularity of the Bottle Bill, the state's most successful recycling program.

“As it turns out, the Bottle Bill is right up there with motherhood and apple pie in terms of its popularity with Vermonters,” said Charity Carbine, environmental health advocate for VPIRG. “People not only like it, but they want to see it updated to include more items for recycling.”

According to the poll, roughly nine out of ten Vermonters think the Bottle Bill is a good idea, and 3 out of 4 expressed strong support for the program. Additionally, 86% of Vermonters favor an update of the law to include water bottles, tea, and other non-carbonated beverages.

“Not only do we find Vermonters to be extraordinarily supportive of the Bottle Bill, this support crosses all traditional divides in the electorate,” said Melissa Chernaik, Senior Analyst with Grove Insight, the polling firm who conducted the research. She continued, “Over nine in ten among every major subgroup—regardless of gender, age or party affiliation—agrees that the Bottle Bill is a ‘good idea.’ We rarely see such strong agreement in support of any program.”

“These figures are extraordinary,” said Carbine. “Perhaps the popularity of the program can be attributed to the fact that people are actually using it.” Carbine is referring to the fact that nearly 80% of those surveyed said they had visited a redemption center or grocery store to redeem bottle deposits.

This analysis is based on a telephone survey of 400 registered voters in Vermont. Interviews were conducted November 15-17, 2010, using professional interviewers. The margin of error for the sample as a whole is plus or minus 4.9 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence.

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Since it was enacted in 1972, the Bottle Bill has been effectively capturing bottles and cans for recycling. Currently, the Bottle Bill achieves an 85% recycling rate for beverage containers covered under the program. These high recycling rates are attributed to the five cent refundable deposit which provides a financial incentive for consumers to return those containers for recycling. Despite the success of the program, the beverage industry is leading an effort to repeal the law.

“Failing to recycle beverage containers can have big environmental impacts including increased litter, energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions,” said Steve Holmes, consultant for the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC).

Concerns about the potential repeal of the Bottle Bill aren’t just limited to environmentalists. Bottle drives are often used by community and youth groups to fund trips, camps, and other local projects. While five cents may not seem like a lot of money, it can add up for groups willing to pick up roadside litter or collect bottles door-to-door.

“Bottle drives provide over a thousand dollars a year for our organization,” said Mary Taylor, executive director of the Central Vermont Humane Society. “Although it’s a small pot of money, it’s money that we count on.”

Union members are also among those who support the Bottle Bill and worry about the future of the law. The Bottle Bill provides jobs in Vermont including employment at redemption centers and work as drivers who pick up bottles and cans from grocery stores and redemption centers.

“This isn’t just about recycling bottles and cans, it’s also about maintaining our ‘green’ jobs in Vermont,” said Duane Messier, President of Teamsters Local 597.

According to advocates, rather than moving backwards, Vermont should build on the recycling success of the Bottle Bill by updating it to include water bottles, sports drinks, and other non-carbonated beverages. Updating the law to include non-carbonated beverage containers could potentially capture more than 226,000 additional bottles and cans a day.

“That’s 157 containers a minute that are currently going into landfills or wind up littering our landscape. Recycling water bottles is just as important as recycling root beer bottles,” said Carbine. “There’s no reason to exclude these materials from the program.”

Advocates also want the State to keep the deposits that aren’t reclaimed by consumers and put them towards environmental programs. Under current law, unclaimed deposits – totaling over \$2 million annually in Vermont – are returned to distributors and bottlers. According to the poll, the vast majority of Vermonters support this as well. Nearly 80% of Vermonters favor using the unclaimed deposits to support or expand conservation and recycling programs.

Companion bills have been introduced in both the House and Senate (H.74 and S.21) that would update the Bottle Bill in these ways. The bills would also create a framework for other kinds of extended producer responsibility (EPR) recycling programs. EPR programs – like the Bottle Bill – require producers of products rather than municipalities and taxpayers to shoulder the burden of collecting and recycling the products at the end of their useful life. Requiring producers to finance the cost of recycling their products gives them a powerful incentive to design their products to be more easily recyclable.

Over the years, Vermont has passed several EPR initiatives including the Bottle Bill, mercury thermostat, and electronic waste recycling programs. According to advocates, establishing a framework that allows the scope of covered products to be expanded creates efficiencies for our Agency of Natural Resources and solidifies the need to hold manufacturers accountable.

Graphs of the poll results are available at www.vpirg.org.